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Early Years Writer in Residence Project Evaluation

Report to Scottish Book Trust

August 2011

Dr. Andy Hancock, University of Edinburgh
Dr. Moira Leslie, University of Edinburgh

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to all the people who have taken the time to participate in this evaluation. In particular, we wish to extend our thanks to the parents and their children, the Home-Start Family Group Worker and the Writer in Residence for their valuable inputs. We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by Scottish Book Trust.

All children have been given pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

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Scottish Book Trust

Early Years Writer in Residence Project Evaluation

Executive Summary

Dr Andy Hancock and Dr Moira Leslie

2011

The Executive Summary provides an overview of the key findings and recommendations. It should be read in conjunction with the main report to obtain further detail of specific findings.

Scottish Book Trust and Home-Start

This evaluation was commissioned by Scottish Book Trust during 2010-2011 to conduct an independent evaluation of an Early Years Writer in Residence project. Scottish Book Trust was awarded funding via the Scottish Arts Council's pARTners fund to run the project in partnership with Home-Start. Scottish Book Trust's Early Years Programme encourages all parents and carers to enjoy books with children from as early an age as possible, aiming to develop a lifelong love of books in every child in Scotland. Working through locally-based partners including libraries, health professionals, early years settings and primary schools, free packs of books are gifted to all children in Scotland when they are aged around six weeks, eighteen months, three years and at Primary 1, along with guidance materials for parents and carers. Home-Start offers support, friendship and practical help to parents with young children in local communities throughout the United Kingdom (UK). The families with whom Home-Start work with require support for reasons that include but are not limited to post-natal illness, domestic violence, disability, bereavement, illness, and social isolation.

Nature and scope of the project

At the project's core were two blocks of weekly workshops, sixteen in total, in which the Early Years Writer in Residence ('the Author') worked collaboratively with a Home-Start group of parents to generate ideas for a children's picture book with text.

The picture book was to be published and distributed to young children across Scotland as part of Scottish Book Trust's Early Years national book gifting programme. The Home-Start group selected to take part in the project meets weekly during school term-time in a local community centre with crèche provision. The community centre is located within the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland, where the percentage of children in 2009-2010 registered for free school meals at the adjoining primary school was 42.9% compared to the Scottish average of 19.8%. This Home-Start group was already well-established prior to the start of the Writer in Residence project, and was involved from the outset of the project by taking part in the interview and selection process for the Author. The project took place over the course of a year and the Author's residency included activities other than the core collaborative picture book writing. These included working with parents and children aged birth to five years at the local council libraries during Bookbug sessions; visiting local nurseries, and along with Scottish Book Trust's Early Years Training Co-ordinator, delivering continued professional development sessions to Early Years professionals and Home-Start employees and volunteers. The focus of the evaluation was a study of the central theme of the project, namely, the impact of the collaboration between the participating parents in the Home-Start group and the Author in writing a children's storybook and, to a lesser extent, the nursery visits.

Aims of the Research

The main aim of the research was to evaluate the impact of the Early Years Writer in Residence project in an area of socio-economic deprivation in Scotland. More specifically the research aims included: (1) to examine the perceptions of parents and other participants during the course of the one-year Writer in Residence Project; (2) to investigate the impact of the Writer in Residence Project on the parents and their children in terms of their involvement in literacy practices, in particular book sharing; (3) to explore parents' experiences of creating stories together; (4) to identify significant features of the project and critically appraise the implementation of the initiative.

Research Methodology and Methods

In order to elicit data-rich responses from the participants in the project a qualitative research method was selected involving questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and

observations. Evidence was also drawn from reflective journals written by key professionals. All participants completed written consent forms (approved by University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee) in addition to providing verbal agreements before participating in this research. Data was gathered from a range of the key participants and partners in the project: sixteen parents and their children, the Writer in Residence, Home-Start Family Group Worker, six Home-Start volunteers, Scottish Book Trust staff (Children's Programme Manager and the Early Years Programme Assistant) and the Regional Consultant Home-start UK.

Key Findings

- There was evidence to suggest that a key strength of the project was the interagency partnership and the collaboration.
- Pre-project data indicated that all parents were involved to some extent in reading to their children, however, many mentioned difficulties with this activity including finding dedicated time and sustaining their children's interest.
- Almost all the parents believed that participating in the project had supported them in establishing more of a 'reading routine' with their children and they talked about the positive impact on the quality of these reading sessions.
- There is evidence to suggest that new experiences such as regular participation in language games and deconstructing a book gave parents insights into sharing texts with their children, ideas for conversations about language and increased confidence to try out and develop new literacy practices in the home.
- Many parents believed that taking part in the activities organised to support their writing of the picture book had encouraged them to see things through the 'eyes of a child'.
- Parents and professionals reported enhanced communication amongst the parents about literacy practices and activities.
- There was evidence that parents' involvement in activities, designed by the Author to support the book writing process, increased their capacity to learn about language in an informal environment and gave parents a deeper understanding about how language is used to create texts.

- Almost all the parents claimed to be reading with more confidence and expression and there was evidence that they could recognise techniques used by the Author and they reported that they made use of this knowledge to support reading with their children.
- All the parents believed that there had been a notable change in the way that they viewed picture books and that the project had ‘opened their eyes’ to the complex process involved in creating a book for young children.
- Some parents offered detailed examples of their children’s early literacy behaviour and from their reports it seemed that they valued and recognised the significance of these events in terms of their children’s emergent literacy development.
- Statements made by the parents demonstrated a sense of pride, ownership and an emotional involvement associated with the shared authorship and publication of the book.
- The participants believed that their experience of being involved in an authentic writing and book publication process had contributed to the success of the project.
- The Author reported that the residency had been an enriching experience and an opportunity to work closely with her audience.
- All the nurseries reported that it was their first experience of an Author’s visit and all expressed interest in working again with visiting authors.
- Nursery staff believed that the Author’s visit to their establishments ‘fitted well’ in the context of Early Years policy in Scotland, national curriculum developments and current initiatives aimed at supporting early literacy.

Recommendations

Future Writer in Residency projects should consider the following:

- The potential that this type of capacity building community project has to support current Scottish Government Early Years policy and priorities.
- The potential of this kind of collaborative venture to strengthen the capacity of families to develop their understanding of language and literacy and encourage their involvement in literacy practices, in particular book sharing.

- Further development of Early Years literacy initiatives that draw on a range of models of interagency partnership.
- The importance of encouraging parents to see things from a child's perspective and the possible impact this can have on effective parenting.
- The potential of using the parents' observations of their children's early literacy behaviour as a focus for group discussions and learning about emergent literacy.
- The scope of the residency and the different roles and responsibilities required within the different strands of the project.
- The challenges around balancing the needs of the participating group and the requirements of the residency.

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1. Introduction and Background

This evaluation was commissioned by Scottish Book Trust during 2010-2011 to conduct an independent evaluation of an Early Years Writer in Residence project. Scottish Book Trust was awarded funding via the Scottish Arts Council's pARTners fund to run the project in partnership with Home-Start. Details of the two organisations involved in the project are set out below.

1.1. Scottish Book Trust's Early Years Programme

Scottish Book Trust's Early Years Programme encourages all parents and carers to enjoy books with children from as early an age as possible, aiming to develop a lifelong love of books in every child in Scotland. Working through locally-based partners including libraries, health professionals, early years settings and primary schools, free packs of books are gifted to all children in Scotland when they are aged around six weeks, eighteen months, three years and at Primary 1, along with guidance materials for parents and carers. A number of research studies have been commissioned in Scotland to look at the impact of the bookgifting programme, including Spratt and Philip (2007) and Berry and McMellon (2008) and the value of dual language books (Spratt et al., 2009).

1.2. Home-Start

Home-Start offers support, friendship and practical help to parents with young children in local communities throughout the United Kingdom (UK). Home-Start schemes are rooted in the communities they serve and in Scotland the charity supports over 2,000 families in 32 communities. (For further details refer to Home-Start Statistics 2009-2010 available at <http://www.home-start.org.uk/about/publications>). The families Home-Start work with require support for many reasons including post-natal illness, domestic violence, disability, bereavement, the illness of a parent or child, or social isolation.

The organisation provides a unique service which recruits and trains volunteers, who are usually parents themselves. These volunteers visit families, with at least one child under five, and offer them informal, friendly, emotional and confidential support. In

Scotland there is a network of about 760 trained volunteers. The volunteers are managed locally, but supported by the national organisation which offers direction, training, information and guidance and ensures consistent and quality support for parents and children across the UK. Studies such as Shinman (2008) show that parents find Home-Start support caring, reliable and focused on their needs.

1.3. The Early Years Writer in Residence Project

The central focus of the Early Years Writer in Residence project was two blocks of weekly workshops (16 weeks in total). These sessions involved the Author working collaboratively with a Home-Start group of parents to generate ideas for a children's picture book. For an overview of these sessions see the Author's blog [<http://everythingispattern.com>]. The Home-Start group was a well-established group and was involved from the very beginning of the project by participating in the selection process and interviews for the author. The group meets for two hours every Wednesday morning during school term in a local community centre with creche provision. The community centre is located within the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2009) and the percentage of children in 2009-2010 registered for free school meals at the adjoining primary school was 42.9% compared to the Scottish average of 19.8%. Furthermore, an adjacent housing area, where one of the parents lived, was named as Scotland's most deprived community in terms of current income, employment, health, education, geographic access to services, housing and crime (Scottish Government, 2009).

It was hoped that the group, with the support of the Author, would create a picture book with text which would be published and distributed to young children across Scotland as part of Scottish Book Trust's Early Years national book gifting programme. Parents and children were also invited to take part in a theatre visit to explore story telling beyond their local community. This multi-faceted residency also involved the following activities:

- Working with parents and young children aged birth to five at the local Council libraries during Bookbug Sessions.
- Visiting local nurseries to allow children to meet a published author/illustrator.
- Delivering continued professional development sessions jointly with Scottish Book Trust's Early Years Training Co-ordinator, to Early Years professionals and Home-Start employees and volunteers.

However, it was agreed in discussion with the Scottish Book Trust Early Years Programme team and the Regional Consultant Home-Start in Scotland that the focus of the evaluation would be a study of the central theme of the project, namely, the impact of the collaboration between the participating parents in the Home-Start group and the Author in writing a children's picture book and, to a lesser extent, the nursery visits. The other elements of the project would be evaluated by Scottish Book Trust.

1.4. Aims of the Study

The main aim of the research was to evaluate the impact of the Early Years Writer in Residence project in an area of socio-economic deprivation in Scotland. More specifically the research aims include:

- To examine the perceptions of parents and other participants during the course of the one-year Writer in Residence Project.
- To investigate the impact of the Writer in Residence Project on the parents and their children in terms of their involvement in literacy practices, in particular book sharing.
- To explore parents' experiences of creating stories together.
- To identify significant features of the project and critically appraise the implementation of the initiative.

1.5. Literature

The evaluation is underpinned by a body of literature in the fields of early intervention, home literacy practices and emergent literacy. A major theme of early intervention projects worldwide has been the implementation of initiatives aimed at the development of literacy acquisition (Bus et al., 1995; Fraser et al., 2001; Moore and Wade, 2003). Parents are children's first educators and a range of studies suggest that shared literacy practices in the home can contribute positively towards children's later literacy learning (Weinberger, 1996; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Makin, 2006; Reese et al., 2010). Furthermore, in the Scottish context recent policy frameworks have emphasised interagency collaboration in conjunction with new approaches that support building the capacity of individuals, families and communities (Scottish Government, 2008; Deacon, 2011; Scottish Government, 2011).

After this introduction and background the following section addresses the research design and research tools employed during the evaluation. Next, a longer, discursive section presents the findings that emerged from the research. The final part contains an overall discussion, key findings and recommendations for future projects.

1.6. Research Design and Methods

This case study draws on a range of data sets to offer an in-depth exploration of the impact of the Writer in Residence Project with the aim of gathering, as Cresswell (1998:61) describes, 'multiple sources of information rich in context.' The data collection process was phased and included the gathering of data pre-project, during the different phases of the project development and at the end of the initiative. This allowed the researchers to build on learning gained as the project evolved through each phase and gave direction to the next phase of the fieldwork. Data was gathered during the following stages of the project:

Phase 1: Pre-project (before 22nd September 2010)

Phase 2: First block of the residency (September–December 2010)

Phase 3: Mid-point of residency (November/December 2010)

Phase 4: Second block residency (January–April 2011)

Phase 5: Post-project (April–May 2011)

The research tools used to gather data from the participants in the study were semi-structured interviews, observations, questionnaires and conversations with children. One of the purposes of the study was to gain insights into the participants' perceptions of their experiences of taking part in the Residency project. Alvesson (2002:64) describes interviews as participants 'communicating their feelings, thoughts, values, experiences and observations in a way that renders their "inner worlds" accessible to the researcher'. Therefore, semi-structured interviews seemed to represent the most appropriate primary tool suitable for gathering qualitative data of this type as it yields rich information and guarantees good coverage. Furthermore, asking open-ended questions allows participants space to express their beliefs and opinions in their own words and freedom to answer if they wish, whilst giving the researcher some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies (Bryman, 2004:113).

The semi-structured interviews with the parents and key professionals were carefully planned by the two researchers in advance and framed from a wide collection of main topics to be covered (whilst allowing a free-flowing conversation). The sequencing of the questions in the interview schedules remained flexible to cover these themes and a branching structure was created in which questions are asked in the light of previous answers. Verma and Mallick (1999) feel that these guidelines or aide-mémoire of questions gives a balance between allowing a variety of responses from one interviewee to another, but at the same time it provides guidance and reasonable consistency across a range of interviews.

Both researchers attended all of the interviews in order to build up a rapport with the parents and to ensure consistency in approach. All the parents were interviewed individually once and the subsequent two sets of interviews were undertaken in groups of two or three. The advantage of this type of group interview is that a 'snowballing' effect can occur. That is, the ideas of individual participants can be responded to by others, gathering both momentum and detail and through this type of interaction answers are likely to be longer and more revealing (Litosseliti, 2003). In line with ethical guidelines, the parents were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview process at any stage. The Author and Family Group Worker were each

interviewed four times individually at the different phases of the project. Other key professionals interviewed were the Home-Start Regional Co-ordinator, Scottish Book Trust Children's Programme Manager and Scottish Book Trust Early Years Programme Assistant.

All interviews were recorded, with the permission of interviewees and fully transcribed. The analysis involved both of the researchers working independently and collaboratively. Each transcript was read thoroughly by the two members of the team to ensure consistency of interpretation. Themes emerging from the data were at first identified and coded, then regularly cross-checked by the two researchers to validate the themes highlighted.

The questionnaires were distributed to parents at the beginning of the project and at the end of the first block of sessions. The information asked for included family details, educational background and current literacy practices in the home. The responses given on the questionnaires were used to initiate questions and support the interview process. A key role in the data gathering process was played by the Family Group Worker working in partnership with the researchers. This involved the Family Group Worker helping to compile the family profiles, coordinating the return of parent questionnaires and arranging the timetable for the interviews at the different phases of the project.

A feature of the evaluation is that it draws on the different elements of the residency to support triangulation of data. The researchers made ten visits to the community centre to conduct interviews, observed a workshop session in each block of the residency and attended the final Showcase event. Not all families in the group had a home visiting volunteer. However, during the project three Home-Start volunteers attended the workshops and four volunteers were interviewed. Although the volunteers cannot directly speak for the families, it was clear that many of these interviewees had developed respectful relationships with the parents whilst visiting them in the home and therefore could provide valuable insights into the parents' perceptions of the project and literacy practices in the home. Ten visits were made to five nurseries involved in the project, eight Early Years staff were interviewed and one Author's visit to a nursery was observed. Evidence was also drawn from the Writer in Residence's

online blog documenting aspects of the project, and the Family Group Worker's diary. In addition, children's perceptions and experiences were gathered using conversations around drawings, an approach that has been used in previous studies (Clark, 2005 et al; Einarsdottir et al., 2009).

In summary, data was gathered from a range of the key participants and partners in the project including:

- 16 parents
- 16 children
- Writer in Residence
- Home-Start Family Group Worker
- Home-Start (Regional) Co-ordinator
- 4 Home-Start volunteers
- 8 nursery staff
- Scottish Book Trust Children's Programme Manager
- Scottish Book Trust Early Years Programme Assistant

1.7. Ethical Considerations

The researchers produced consent forms for all of the research participants. The researchers submitted an application form to the University of Edinburgh Ethics Sub-Committee (ESC) for ethical approval before the research commenced. Details of the School of Education's research ethics approval system and procedure, and Ethical guidelines for research with children and vulnerable groups are available at <https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/edusupwiki/Research+Ethics>

1.8. Description of Home-Start Parent Group

Sixteen parents were members of the Home-Start group which took part in the project. However, over the course of the project three of these parents left the group after gaining employment and two parents joined and took up these vacant places midway through the project. The age of the parents ranged from twenty-one to forty-two years

of age. One of the criteria for participating in a Home-Start group is that a parent must have a child less than five years of age, however, the parents' profiles gained from the questionnaire indicated a non-homogeneous selection of parents. For example, ten members of the group had two children or more (with one parent having five children). Half the group had left school at fifteen or sixteen years of age although a number of the parents had later pursued educational experiences at further education colleges. Three of the parents had completed a university degree. Five parents were employed on a part-time basis.

2. Findings: The Parent Group

This section outlines the findings of the evaluation.

2.1. Pre-project: Parents' Perspectives

Data captured from the profile questionnaires and individual interviews at the beginning of the project offered extensive and rich insights into the parents' current literacy practices and expectations of the project. The intention here was to capture the parents' lived experiences before the project started and not to establish a baseline for quantitative data comparison.

All of the parents reported reading to their children prior to the project began, however, this activity varied in time and regularity. The majority of the parents stated that they read to their children three or more times a week. However, a few of the parents reported that they read to their children only once a week. Five members of the group said they read to their children every day.

The parents also said that there were occasions when other significant adults read to their children including partners, extended family members (such as grandparents and aunts), Home-Start volunteers, babysitters, neighbours and friends (including members of the Home-Start group). In two families there were instances of siblings reading to each other. During the interviews, as well as talking about current reading practices in the home, some of the parents also offered vivid recollections of being read to during their childhood. As one parent put it:

It's been passed on. My mum and my gran reading to me, and then me reading to my kids and hoping that they read to their kids.

All the children had some access to children's books at home, and the idea of having children's books around was taken for granted in all of the families. Of the twelve parents who supplied details of how many children's books they had in the home the results varied as the following data suggests (number of books in brackets): five (10–20), two (20–30), one (30–40), one (50+), three (100+).

Eleven out of the thirteen parents who completed profile questionnaires stated that they were members of a library but they were not regular visitors. As one parent said:

I'd want [child] enjoying the library but I'd never quite made it up.

A variety of reasons were given by the parents for not going to a library. These included a local community library closing and the parent being more comfortable with the library she was used to; difficulty getting into the town centre 'especially with three kids'; taking young children to a place that is 'quiet'; worries about damaging books; access difficulties with a pushchair and 'fitting it in around demands of work and nursery arrangements'. Four of the parents borrowed books from a library with visits ranging from 'every couple of weeks' to 'once a month'. One parent mentioned getting the Bookbug bag from the library and another reported going to a Bookbug Library Challenge.

As a way of engaging the parents in talking about book reading, parents were asked about their favourite book and many named one from their childhood. The parents were also asked whether their child had a favourite book which they read to them or looked at often.

As well as shared reading almost all the parents interviewed offered examples of other literacy practices that the child was involved with in the home. These practices included using the Bookbug bag, singing together, a parent and son making up stories, copying letter shapes, drawing pictures of nursery rhymes, pretend reading, children engaging their parents in conversations around the books they were reading and parents adjusting the storyline or narrative to stimulate interest. A few of the parents gave examples of emergent literacy behaviours. One parent gave the example of her three-year-old daughter whom she said she had read to since she was a baby and described her as 'being really into her books in every way'. She went on to say:

She loves reading. You know, every night I'll read her the story, then she's got to take that book to bed with her and she tried to remember what I've said to her. And you listen to her and she's trying to read it herself. She'll make her own wee words up.

In two families the children were exposed to scripts other than English and attended a weekend complementary school in order to maintain the parents' heritage language

and culture. For illustrations of children's engagement with multilingual texts see Figures 1 and 2 below.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figures 1 and 2: At the Turkish school

Although the data gathered from parents before the project began indicated that all were involved to some extent in reading to their children, many mentioned difficulties with this activity including finding dedicated time and sustaining their children's interest. The parents with more than one child recalled spending more time reading with the first child. As one parent said, 'With your first you do everything and then it kind of falls away'. Similarly, another parent commented:

When you're a mum you just kind of rush about and with David I used to read to him all the time and we used to sit and we would have like, you know, books and we would choose books and read to him and you could take loads of time. But then after you get two and then the third baby I think your time becomes less.

Other difficulties reported by the parents included getting children to sit and concentrate, and lack of confidence in selecting books appropriate for the age and stage of their children. As one parent reported:

When me and Craig sit down to read, he just runs away if it's one with just words and pictures. He just isn't interested. I try to point out things to make it more fun, but I find it really hard to keep his imagination.

When the parents were asked if they had been given any information or support in helping them to read with their children contrasting responses were given. Half the parents replied 'no' and one parent stated that she would have been 'offended if someone had tried to offer advice'. Those who answered positively mentioned the

Bookstart gifting programme and health visitors. One parent offered a particularly powerful account of the sensitive way her health visitor had encouraged her to read to her baby to encourage bonding. She reported that the health visitor said:

She [health visitor] said even though he can't speak, he can't walk, he can't crawl, the wee noises he's telling you that he's enjoying it. You know? So she'd encouraged me to kind of start telling stories to him and reading stories to him and stuff... so I made the most of it. But it was my health visitor, she really encouraged me to read.

When asked about their expectations of the projects all the parents made positive statements. Many said they were 'excited' about the prospect of writing a children's book and there was a sense of 'enthusiasm'. These views were also supported by evidence gathered from the Home-Start Family Group Worker and Home-Start volunteers who observed the parents talking about their involvement in the project. The Family Group Worker was positive about the project from the start and showed an interest in why some children enjoyed reading and others did not. She wanted the parents to enjoy the project and her belief in the potential of the project is captured in the following quote:

I was quite excited at the thought that we could maybe make this work 'cause I'm all for making life better for as many people as you can and I think reading does give a better life in many ways, financially and as well as emotionally, so that was my initial thought.

The thought of writing a book was expressed as 'catching the imagination' and viewed as doing something 'different'. Although the parents recognised that it would be a 'challenging experience' many of the parents mentioned being 'able to tell people' and used the expression of being 'part of it'.

From the beginning of the project there was evidence to suggest that many of the parents believed that the experience of taking part in the project might have a positive impact on them personally and on their children. One parent said:

I think I'm going to learn a wee bit more about myself ... Maybe learn a bit more about our children as well.

Many statements indicated their aspirations for their children and they frequently talked about wanting ‘the best’ for their children. One parent encapsulated this view by saying:

My English myself wasn't very good because I wasn't a reader when I was a child, and I've always said that when I had children I would encourage them to read because I feel that that's really important and I think it only improves your written English. And I think English was the one thing that I could never pass and I was never very good and I have felt that it held me back a wee bit because I didn't have my Higher English, so I always felt now I have children of my own that it was so important for me to read to them and for them to like books that I felt that would bring them on which was lacking in myself. I was never a reader. The only time I read is on holiday. Do you know what I mean kind of thing? I felt that kind of held me back, so obviously I didn't want that for my own children.

One parent who talked at length about her interest in words and language and how some words ‘rolled off your tongue’ discussed how she hoped her daughter would ‘continue that fascination’ and she said ‘that’s why I’m quite excited about this book thing’. The parent went on to explain that her daughter was ‘quite a wee creative thing’ who ‘loves to draw and tries to write’ and she hoped that she would ‘go down that road, the creative way’.

It is interesting to note that in the interviews many of the parents made links between taking part in the project and their own self-esteem. One parent mentioned being ‘completely proud’ to take part ‘in something worthwhile that my children are going to see’. Others looked forward to experiencing a sense of achievement as the following suggest:

I don't read to him enough. Maybe doing this will encourage me to read with him more ... there'll be something I can say when he's older 'look I tried and wrote you a book'.

So I'm excited! I keep telling everyone, I'm going to be part of this! 'Cause it's a good thing, you know, and it's good for me to then say to Juliette, 'Mummy did this and mummy was part of this'.

A sense of achievement really ... like a feather in my cap ... my daughter would be able to say 'My mum was involved in writing the book and this is one of my favourite books'.

It's just exciting to be part of something that's going to be part of kids' lives.

Right from beginning the parents were looking forward to the end product and getting a reaction from their own children as indicated in the following statements:

Reading it to my kids and just seeing their views. They love reading ... so it's just waiting to find out what they think of it. And see if they enjoy it, if it's a keepsake book or a 'no we don't like it back-in-the-cupboard book'.

No, it's just like the inner child, isn't it? It's about letting yourself go and having a laugh and creating something that everyone, well hopefully everyone, is going to like.

It is interesting to note that from the inception of the project the group strongly believed that there would be a finished product and looked forward to its publication. The following quote from one parent sums up this feeling of anticipation:

I can't wait to be able to read it, to see what it's like at the end of it.

2.2. Parents' General Comments about the Project

All members of the group talked very positively about their involvement in the project and their comments indicated that they had enjoyed taking part. Words and phrases used to describe the project included, 'really good', 'brilliant', 'dead interesting', and 'enjoyable'. They talked about the project as having been 'great fun'. One parent, summing up the views of the group, said 'It's been such a laugh.' Another stated, 'we are having a lot of fun, but it's building confidence in everybody as well.' They talked about 'every week being different' and 'everyone taking part'. Many mothers discussed their commitment to the project and they described how they went to great lengths in order to 'get in on time' for the sessions.

The Home-Start Family Group Worker expressed similar views and she believed that the parents had responded very positively to the project. She said that parents regularly made comments and sent her texts that offered 'positive feedback about their involvement'. She also presented the attendance sheet for the group sessions as evidence of the parents' commitment and enjoyment of the project. She said that this showed that 'they wanted to come.' If this had not been the case she said that they

would have been ‘quick to let her know’ and would have ‘voted with their feet’. Continuing with this theme she explained:

If they weren't enjoying it and they weren't feeling the benefits of it, I would've known very quickly - the attendance drops. There's a loyalty there, but it does not over-ride anything else.

Scottish Book Trust representatives noted that the feedback they had received from participants was that the group had been very positive, that all involved had ‘really embraced’ the aim of creating a children’s book and that many positive things had come out of the initiative.

It is important to note that many of the parents reported that some weeks they would be having an ‘off day’ because of circumstances outwith the group, for example arriving feeling very tired. However, because of the approach adopted by the Author in running the group the parents said that they did not feel under any pressure to contribute. This view is well represented by one parent who explained:

I think we all have days where, it depends on, as you probably know as a mother, it depends how much sleep you've had the night before whether you feel like contributing as much. But there's been no pressure. So if you're maybe having an off day and you just feel like you just kind of want to sit and listen, there's no pressure on you either, you know, which has been really good, you know. And you can take part or not.

Although the parents’ comments illustrated their clear enjoyment of the project it is interesting to note that many of the parents also viewed the sessions as ‘work’ and spoke about ‘getting the job done’ and that they were working to a ‘timescale.’

There was also a recurring theme about ‘having to get your brain going’. As one parent put it:

Suddenly you've got to kind of try and work your brain and think about things.

For a few parents this proved to be a challenge with one saying, ‘I was coming to the group and it was straight into work.’ These parents suggested having the sessions with the author ‘every other week’ or dividing the sessions into two parts.

There was evidence of excitement and pride when parents spoke about writing the book together. They talked about looking forward to ‘seeing it in print’ and not being able to ‘wait till it comes out’. The general feeling of the group was summed up by one parent who said proudly, ‘It’s not every day you get to write a book is it?’ There was also a sense of excitement thinking about how their children would respond to the finished picture book. Almost all the parents mentioned the significance of this at some point during the interviews and many imagined how their children would react and what they would say. For example, one parent imagined ‘seeing their wee faces’ and went on to say:

At the end of it when you show your kids this book and you can say ‘Well mummy helped with that book’.

Many of the parents believed that they were ‘doing something for our children’. One viewed the book as a ‘legacy’, another as an ‘heirloom’ and yet another parent stated ‘it will outlast us you know’. Laughing, another group member said that the experience was ‘one I can tell the grandkids’.

Reports of parents experiencing a ‘sense of achievement’ were echoed by some of the Home-Start volunteers. They offered their thoughts on what they viewed as the positive impact that involvement in the project had had on individual parent’s self-esteem and confidence. One volunteer believed that taking part in the project had been ‘a good boost’ for the mother she befriended. She went on to say:

She’s told me herself that it’s good and once it finally gets published, and seeing her name on that book, she can then go home to her children and say, ‘This is what mummy’s been doing’ and it’s a book also for her children as well, because they’re at nursery age, the right age.

Another volunteer echoed this view when she said:

It’s also good for the family as well who are taking part in it as they can say that ‘I participated in this’ and it gives them a wee confidence boost as well to say that they’ve achieved something.

2.3. Parents Talking to their Children and Others About the Project

A noteworthy finding in this study is that there was evidence to suggest that the group felt a sense of pride and ownership, as well as an emotional involvement associated with the authorship of the picture book and their participation in the project. The

parents frequently made reference to ‘our book.’ They reported that they had told others, and particularly the significant people in their lives, that they were ‘writing a book’. Their comments demonstrated that they wanted to share what they were doing and ‘let people know about it’. For example, two parents discussed how they had told their health visitor and the staff at their children’s nursery that they were writing a book that would be put in the Bookbug pack. They reported that they were excited about its publication because:

You’re going to be able to like say, ‘This is what we done, this is what we’ve been talking about’.

One parent talked about telling her grandmother who she said was ‘backing me up 110%’ and had told her ‘to go for it.’ Another said:

I’ve told anybody I haven’t seen for ages, ‘guess what I’ve been doing. You are going to get a copy of our book in your bookstore’.

While another said she was telling all her friends who were pregnant because they would be getting a copy of her book in the Bookbug pack. One parent shared the news with her employer who she thought would be interested because she had a daughter who was a writer. She told her ‘Oh, aye, we’re doing a wee book’. However, not all the parents received a positive response from the people they told about the book and in some cases the news was met with disbelief. One parent gave an account of how her ‘boss’ had laughed at her when she told him. She thought he had reacted in this way because her written English was ‘not very good’. She said:

And I think that’s because I was never a reader. And that’s why I really want to encourage my children to read because I feel that it’s held me back.

She described how she was looking forward to showing him the published book and, raising her arm, said she would ‘go like that – Yes!’ She reported that she had responded to her ‘boss’ saying:

I am, I am you know. I’m going to bring it in.

There was evidence from the data that many of the parents had talked to their children about their involvement in writing the book and about the Author and the activities of the group. This is illustrated in the following quotes from interviews with parents:

So, I'd started to tell him bits and bobs. And he seems to know that I'm making a book.

Every week just bits about it, about the wee girl and things like that.

One parent said that she told her son what she was doing because he always asked her 'What did you do today at your group?' During a conversation the researchers had with this child it was clear that he knew his mother was writing a book with 'other ladies'. Talking about the book he said:

It's about a wee girl and her mum calls her a mouse.

During conversations with children when they were asked to draw pictures of being read to at home, the same child spontaneously made a book and on the cover wrote 'ofer' (author) and 'ilastated' (illustrator) with his name under each.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 3: *Child's book sleeve showing 'author' and 'illustrator'*

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 4: *Front cover of child's book*

A few of the nursery-aged children spoke about their parents' involvement in writing the book. For example, one four-year-old child, who knew his mother was writing a book told the researchers that the little girl in the book was called 'Mouse'.

When asked who his mother was writing the book with he replied 'Alison's friends' (see Figure 5) and when asked who Alison was he replied that she was 'an author' and 'she makes books'. When asked 'What is an author?' he replied she 'writes the words' and he also knew that the 'illustrator draws the picture'.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 5: *Mummy and Alison's friends*

There was also evidence of school-aged children having knowledge of their parents writing a book. One nine-year-old boy, whose mother reported that he was really excited about her working on the book, said that his mother had told his younger brother and himself 'at the same time' about working with the author. He explained:

They're writing a book and it's like they're all writing a book about a girl and all that. It's like she's a mouse.

When asked what he thought about his mother writing a book he replied:

Happy, happy I can't wait to see it when she published the book.

His mother had clearly told him details about the storyline of the book as he seemed to be able to quote the ending of the book when he said, 'The last bit says I'll always be my Mum's little mouse.'

Another four-year-old child who spoke about his mother writing the book talked about the Author's visit to his nursery and said the Author read 'a nursery book about a pie and a dog jumping up.'¹

Other children had told their parents about the Author's visit to their nursery and parents reported discussing the visit with their children at home. For example, one

¹ The Author was reading her book 'Apple Pie ABC' published in 2010 by Orchard Books.

parent said that her son had told her that the Author had read a story and that he and his friend had been drawing. She reported that her son had already met the Author and had recognised her when she came to the nursery. He also knew that his mother was writing a book with the Author. She explained:

So he already knew who she [the Author] was so I think he'd already put that together, he knew and I had explained to him a few times about what we were doing.

Another parent described how a conversation with her son while reading together had prompted her to tell him she was writing a book with an author. She told the interviewer that the children in her son's nursery had been looking at books and had been introduced to the word 'author'. She said:

They were learning authors, so one of the times I sat down to read him a book that's what he asked me, 'And who's the author mum?'. So then, so he encourages me as well ... I started to tell him about the author. So he knows all about [the Author] as well. I think she's going to try and go to his nursery at some time.

The two examples above are significant because they bring together literacy experiences and activities that take place in the home, nursery and the parent group. For the parents and children this offered a shared experience and focus for discussion. It could also be argued that as the children made these connections it offered them a more holistic view of the place of literacy in their lives.

2.4. Communication Amongst The Parents About Literacy Practices And Activities

During the course of the project the group activities stimulated conversations where parents shared childhood memories of favourite books, parents and grandparents reading and making up stories with them, and singing songs and rhymes together. It is interesting to note that many of the parents spoke about enjoying and passing on these literacy activities that they had experienced as children. As one parent said:

That's what I was telling the group two weeks ago. There's a wee rhyme that my dad used to say to us that's, like, from down Ayrshire way ... David, he used to love it when he was wee 'cause you put his name in it and we used to say that all the time.

The Home-Start Family Group Worker noted that the social and interactive nature of the group had always encouraged the parents to share concerns in a supportive environment. However, as the project progressed she observed that more of the conversations were centred around advice about literacy activities. She felt this was important because:

Instead of getting advice from, like, someone on a professional level, it's like getting advice from other mothers.

The Family Group Worker gave an example of this type of conversation amongst the parents that had involved a discussion about the choice of children's books and their appropriateness in terms of content, age and gender. These conversations were helped by easy access to books that had been supplied by the Library Service directly to the group sessions. The Family Group Worker called this 'a pressure free library'. In addition the Bookbug packs stimulated conversations about the storyline and theme of the books, and the blank books in the pack acted as a stimulus for parents and children to write their own stories together. It was noted by the Family Group Worker that the 'Pirate book' was the book most frequently discussed.

The roles of both the Family Group Worker and the Author were important in supporting conversations about books and encouraging borrowing books as the following comment by the Family Group Worker suggests:

I noticed three people kind of wandered away with them again and it's still working, the books are still there every week and either [the Author] or myself pull out a few that we think that, you know, we like the look of and think, 'Oh, that's quite interesting' and usually what will happen is when the mums first come in they'll ... they'll peruse the books and then say 'Is it okay if I just take them away and then bring them back?' So, it's still ongoing, still popular and it does ... it sparks a bit of discussion because sometimes there's a book that either they have or they recognise from their own childhood and they say, 'Oh remember this one' and then you know ... so there's a lot more book discussion going on around, you know, even when we're not actually working with [the Author].

The Family Group Worker explained that in the past the group had covered some discussion about the benefits of reading as part of general parenting skills such as bedtime routines. However, during the course of the project she commented on parents 'prioritising reading' and 'reading at different times of the day, not just a

bedtime activity' as well as spending time in bookshops with their children 'choosing books together'. The Family Group Worker also reported that the parents began to talk more about their observations of reading practice at home. During one interview she said that this was not something that the parents 'would have picked up so much beforehand'.

The Family Group Worker observed the parents starting to bring children's books into the group and share them around. This instigated spontaneous interactions such as 'Oh, do you like that book?' and 'Oh, I like this one and that was my favourite when I was small' and 'You need to get a copy of this one' and 'Oh, try that and see if he likes this one'. The Family Group Worker's diary, where she documented the parents' response during the sessions, included the phrases 'enthusiastic book choice sharing' and 'a discussion about literacy and school achievement'. Furthermore, she wrote in her diary 'it was agreed that the project could only improve their children's chances'.

During the interviews one parent gave a detailed account of what they perceived to be a significant event connected with the project. The parent outlined a conversation she had had with a friend which highlighted the bonding between a parent and a child when reading a book. The parent explained how the creche worker told her about her daughter's keen interest in a book called 'Why I love my Mummy' and how the character in the book looked just like her brother. The creche worker encouraged the child to take the book home. The parent then went on to describe the two of them bonding around a book and became very emotional about it:

Well, me and her were sitting reading it. Do you know, see when it came to the end, I was crying. It was 'Why I Love My Mummy'. And it was just all the wee things. And she was like looking adoring and I just thought that was the nicest moment.

One week a parent had come to the group and informed the others that she had been on the Scottish Book Trust website and had viewed the Author's blog. She also sent emails with the website link to other members of the group. This prompted parents to go onto the Scottish Book Trust website to 'check it out' and one parent reported 'following the blog' and 'going on it every week'. Those parents who had viewed it reported positively as it outlined what was happening each week. The same parent who communicated the information about the blog also informed the other members of

the group that the Author was on Twitter. However, it is worth pointing out that not all the parents had access to the internet at home or used Twitter.

Two parents gave vivid accounts of how references to their children on the Author's blog had an emotional impact on them. The first parent described how she took a photograph of her son reading a picture book from the Bookbug pack to his baby brother. She then brought the photograph in to show the group. The Author posted the photograph on her blog (Figure 6) and the parent responded enthusiastically stating, 'That's my boys!' and told the other parents to 'get on the website'. The parent went on to explain how Scottish Book Trust had forwarded the picture to Rob Campbell, the author of the picture book that her sons were reading and, as a result, she received an email from Rob Campbell saying, 'That was lovely' and that 'he was really, really impressed and that he was really thankful to get the photo, which was nice'. The parent then shared the email from Rod Campbell with her son and noted his proud reaction:

I had showed him the email and we had it read out to him and he was, he was dead impressed. And I'm like 'Look you're on this website'. And he said, 'That's me, that's me and my brother. So he was dead chuffed with himself. So it was good. It was nice.



Figure 6: Reading with my brother

The second parent described how an activity using the rhymes of their children's names stimulated the author to place an illustration on her blog (Figure 7). The parent's emotional response is encapsulated in the following quotation:

Well, I went on it one day as well and [the Author] had done this wee illustration. It's actually one of my children. We done the children's name, like I've got a son, 'I know a boy, his name is (rhymes with cheese)' and his was 'He likes eating olives and cheese'. And she'd drawn a wee picture of a wee boy sitting at a table with all this feta cheese piled up on his green olives. And I seen that and I had tears rolling down my face 'cause I said 'That's my son!'



Figure 7: *Illustration from Author's blog*

There were instances of the parents communicating with one another to update each other about the project. A number of the parents meet outside of the project, for example when supporting each other with babysitting, and they reported that they had regular conversations about the project as they had 'lots to think about'. They also discussed activities that they had enjoyed or those that they had found challenging. As one parent put it:

Well [name of parent] one of the ones I see quite a lot outside of the group and we've spoke quite a lot about it ... different things that we maybe liked and didn't like and some weeks it was quite confusing wasn't it? We're all like that ... by the time you came out of the group you were like, your head was, you know, spinning.

The Family Group Worker verified this account of increased conversations among the parents about the project stating:

I think everybody's really quite excited, you know, and they're talking about it outside of the group ... people are having ideas.

The parents received a weekly newsletter from the Family Group Worker, but some of the parents (who did not have access to the internet) suggested it would be helpful if this newsletter also outlined the different techniques introduced by the Author each week for those who were unable to attend. For example, an outbreak of chicken pox or attendance at college had caused some parents to miss some sessions. It was suggested that a breakdown of the different activities could act as an aide-mémoire so that they could revisit the techniques at a later date with their children. As two parents put it:

'Cause she's done some techniques that I haven't been here for, like the diamond shape. I heard of it but I don't know what it is. And I think I would really like to know what that is.

I feel like you kind of, if you miss one week or come in late you miss a massive bit.

The Family Group Worker reported that using text messages as a means of communication had been encouraged within the group 'to tell people when you do a good job'. She often received texts from parents about different things but she felt it was significant that as the project progressed the parents were sending texts about literacy practices in the home:

The amount of texts I've had like 'We're at the library', 'Oh, here's a picture of the children reading together' or 'Oh, you know which book I bought the other day?' There's definitely been a much more, kind of an emphasis. But, also the other side of it is that they're proud of themselves because this is actually a good parenting thing and 'I'm going to tell you because I feel good' which is something we work on in confidence building.

The Home-Start volunteers have a wide-ranging role in supporting the parents during their weekly visits to the home and one element of this includes helping out with everyday parenting situations such as literacy related practices in the homes. When interviewed, the volunteers mentioned reading to children as 'there are always books lying around', making up stories and choosing books as birthday gifts. Therefore, the

volunteers felt that the project was 'well connected' to their role and as a result they could contribute to and build on the enhanced conversations about storybooks, reading and literacy related activities in the home.

2.5. Parents' Involvement in Language Activities

A point emphasised by almost all of the parents was that although they found the language activities challenging they felt that it was 'not like being in school'. As well as their clear enjoyment of these activities, from their comments it seemed that they saw the relevance of the tasks and understood the purpose for their learning. The evidence suggests that the authentic context of exploring language with the author in order to create the picture book was highly motivating and made sense to the parents. The following statement by a parent talking about grammar and language conventions sums up the views of many of the parents:

Yeah, you learn them at school because you know you've got an exam if you know what I mean? But in everyday life, that we're doing just now with you know our children and whatever, and this book writing it's like remembering what an adjective is. What is a verb, a pronoun or onomatopoeia. How to pronounce it much less spell it! The thing is it's been good for us because it's kick started the grey matter again.

Although the parents found the activities demanding there is a sense that they appreciated the challenge. This was backed up by the Home-Start Family Group Worker who stated:

They're looking forward to seeing [the Author] and what she's doing and there's no fears there and there are a lot of fears within similes and metaphors, even I was thinking 'Oh my goodness, I can't believe we were writing poems!'

One parent summed up the feelings of many in the group when she remarked that it was 'twenty plus years' since she had been to school and 'trying to remember your verbs from your adjectives gets your brain working again'. One parent remarked 'my brain hurts but I know it's worth it'. They recognised that this was hard and demanding work and many jokes were made about undertaking this type of challenging work so early in the morning. One parent reported that she had said to the Author:

'Really, at this time in the morning!' But see once you start, like see after you answer a couple of things, it's so strange how much you get your brain into gear. When you think about that thing with the DS and them sitting playing they brain games, I'll tell you that's what we were like in the morning. And that was you, you were up and running.

One parent gave an interesting insight into the value of supporting parents through this type of informal approach to learning:

I would feel a bit offended if someone was to come into my house and sit down. You know how people can be patronising in a way, and say 'You're doing that wrong. This is the way you do it.' That's what I'd feel ... 'cause it's a personal thing. I mean reading to your child ... but then getting ideas from somebody, see like she [the Author], she gives you new ideas, then that's fine 'cause they're not coming into your house and you've got to do this, that and the next thing. That's just the way I feel.

Although the parents found some sessions challenging they enjoyed the variation. As one parent put it 'every week has been different'. The parents could all describe the different activities they had taken part in during the project and offered illustrations such as Kennings. The Author's blog defines a Kenning as 'a type of metaphor, originally used in Anglo-Saxon and old Norse poetry' where an object is described in a two-word phrase such as 'seal-field' for 'sea'. During the interviews the parents gave examples of Kennings they had made up to describe their children's personalities such as 'blanket hugger' and 'hair stroker'.

According to the Family Group Worker there were several instances of the parents playing with language with 'everyone joining in' and 'laughter' as a consequence of the Author's activities. The Family Group Worker described how one parent had asked for a biscuit and continued the rhyming theme saying 'Wait, I've got sugar in my tea and I'm gonna mix it'. She also described how when they did a session on animal noises 'they got right into that'. She continued:

I would say it almost became a theme for the group that there was noises that just came into conversation from that session.

The Family Group Worker believed that there had been a significant development in the parents' understanding of language and then speculated 'I can only imagine that story time must be much more fun'.

The role of the Author was fundamental in making the sessions challenging yet accessible. As one parent noted:

A lot of work, yeah. We've learned an awful lot. [The Author's] been an absolute genius. She's been very good at getting the information across to us in a way that everybody can understand without complicating it.

Another parent noted her initial reticence, but described how the Author's explanations about language had made learning enjoyable again:

See, like, when it comes to nouns and that, I wasn't so good at English in school. So it kind of went a wee bit above my head sometimes. And, but then I was just coming to the first couple of weeks at that time and I was still quite shy. I don't want to speak up sort of thing. So it was a confidence thing for me, more so than anything else. So, but then at the same time, I mean if you asked me a noun and things like that I couldn't tell you. But at the time I got to grasp with it after [the Author] explained.

In addition, the parents offered descriptions of how the Author had employed a variety of learning approaches including individual work, interactive group work, 'hands-on' and whole group brainstorming activities. Some admitted they felt they were 'getting lost' during some activities especially when they were working on their own. However, there was unanimous agreement that they valued the support of the group as they believed they had each other 'to bounce ideas off'.

This type of approach made the parents feel their contributions were valued. As one parent put it:

Well, we've done, like obviously group work that's all of us and then some things, like we done different things and we worked in like kind of four small groups and done that. And then put all our things in and seen what it done. Most of the time it's a full groups thing and we work our two separate groups or small groups. And then get, just different inputs off everybody and just seeing what everybody else comes up with.

Another approach by the Author was to give the parents more ownership over their own learning as the Family Group Worker described:

But certainly everybody was delighted. It was tough work. They were doing nouns, adjectives, alliteration. And then but [the Author] wisely had done a sort of short workshop and then handed out children's books and asked them to pick out things that they thought they liked. And to, to see if we could figure out what they were to put into our book and they really did like that, you know, because it afforded them the opportunity to have a chat at the same time as, as getting on with the work if you like.

The Author was quite clear that ideas for the book emerged from the work of the group. She claims she was given 'scope' as 'the job description says that I can be inspired by the session'. She decided to go through the process of writing a book 'in a way that I do it' in order to 'demystify the process'. However the Author also recognised the 'tricky process' and inherent challenges of writing a book as a group so that 'it wasn't being driven by the more vocal participants in the group'. The Author articulated her approach in the following way:

So I think the way I did it, it kind of worked because rather than sitting down and saying 'Right what shall we write about', you know, we just played and we let things emerge. I wanted to get them much more involved in the writing process and to feel that they had written it. We just played and let things emerge and it did evolve in a group way. I deliberately wanted it to be organic because then it's not, do you know it's not me basically imposing what I want to do on them. So, it is a kind of balancing act.

The Author reported that she was aware that not all the group members would feel comfortable writing on their own and expressed her commitment to promoting an inclusive approach to the sessions as the following suggests:

I've been trying to do more collaborative things where everyone can put forward ideas vocally and then I can write it down and ... it means everyone can contribute no matter how confident they feel about writing themselves. I don't want it to be like school you know. When I am asking them to write things on their own you suddenly get into that school atmosphere.

As the sessions progressed the Author felt more confident about involving the group in as she put it 'more challenging things' building on 'mutual trust and respect'. The Family Group Worker also recognised the importance of getting the balance right of giving direction, and making sure the ideas from the group are valued.

One of the consequences of the workshops and involvement in the creative writing sessions was that individual parents talked about ‘building up my confidence’ and they continuing to think about the experiences at home as the following suggests:

Every time I walk out of there I’m like ‘I could write a book, I’m just going to go home and write a book’. And wee thoughts, you are doing the dishes and wee thoughts can come into your head about things.

This increased confidence also manifested in some members of the group wishing to continue education or go back to work:

I think it’s good for groups like ours that have maybe got our situation. It gives us more ... like obviously I’m here because I’ve got three kids. I’m pretty much on my own and I’ve had all these issues and this has gave me something to think about. Do you know what ... eventually I can go back to work.

As well as building up confidence a number of parents with school-aged children felt that taking part in these language activities was highly relevant in terms of the support they would be able to offer their children as the following statements indicate:

It increases my vocabulary. On a personal level it will give me more experience to deal with the boys.

To learn to teach them. ‘Cause they’re going to come home with homework and it’s been a good way for us to brush up on ... kinda things ... I mean I don’t want my daughter ever to come to me and I don’t know anything.

It’ll be good for when they come home and say ‘Right can you help with that?’ and say ‘Yes, I can ‘cause I know what an adjective is’. You know I remember now ... it’s a very good tool.

The Author also recognised the impact the workshops were having on the parents’ confidence and talked about one parent going back to college:

When you’re at home and you’re with your own kids, so it gives you that boost again. It makes you think ‘I can get back and do this’.

A significant insight for all of the parents, gained from the work with the Author, was how much thinking and effort goes into writing a children’s book. They were also interested in the format of children’s picture books including the number of pages, the sleeves and ‘the pictures at the beginning and the pictures at the end and how it all sort

of ties in'. These new understandings into the bookmaking process are encapsulated in the following quotations:

When you are reading a book you don't think of all the stages involved from the beginning to the end.

It just kind of shows you like what goes into like writing the book. I mean you just think that somebody puts a book together. But then it's like one of the times she was telling us about the, like the twelve, the twelve pages wasn't it?

I always thought it was just a case of somebody just sat down and thought right just write a couple of bits and bobs and that was it. But there's a lot more thinking in it. There's a lot of rhyming. Well, not always rhyming. And it's got to fit obviously the age group. You've got to make sure, a wee bit of fun in there. And it's got to really catch the eye as well. And I never thought about it. I just thought it was a case of just sit down and ...

I always open books for the kids and I thought, 'There's no really much effort gone into that'. So we've learned a lot about the whole thing, yeah, I just didn't realise how much.

In addition the parents mentioned the sounds of words, size of font catching the eye, making it entertaining, fitting the age group, children being able to read words independently, the relationship between pictures and words, pictures conveying the story, and 'words that trigger their imagination'. As one parent said:

See that it's a lot more than just a few words on a page, you know. That it has more meaning to it and there's somebody actually sat there and spent that time looking at it.

The Family Group Worker also noted that the parents had reported to her that the way in which they chose books for their children had changed. She illustrated this point by reading from notes that she had made in her diary:

And I've got a quote here, but I don't know who said it 'cause it's just in my general notes. And it said, 'Now I'll sit in the shop or the library and read a book to see how it worked for us', which I really like. The idea that a book will work for you, rather than you making a book work.

2.6. Establishing Reading Routines: Parents' Perspectives

As noted earlier in the evaluation, data gathered from the parents before the project indicated that all the families had books in the house. However, comments from a few

parents revealed that before the project there were instances of having books in the house that were not being used. As one parent said:

I've got piles, I mean, we have, we've got one of these big plastic boxes in the bedroom and it's full of books, and it's lay there. I shifted it from corner to corner to corner in the room.

Many of the parents reported that as their families had grown in number, the pressures of time and organisation had resulted in them reading less to their children, however, they believed that their involvement in the project had reminded them of the importance of this activity and they described how they were now prioritising reading with their children. This view was reflected in the following statements:

I think it's brought to mind just exactly how important ... like I think we did read to the children, but it's more when you've got time. When you've got three young children it is dead hard to try and sit them down, but I think since the project came along, I think I'm more aware and to make that time to sit down than I was before ... I've changed, more that it's more of a routine kind of thing. It was always important to me, and I did read to them every now and again, but it was to get them into that mindset that 'right, come on, it's bedtime, we'll read a story, we'll get you to bed, and then you can watch the telly'.

'Cause, I think as a mother you are more like, 'The house is a mess, I've got to do this, got to do that, got to do this'. And, you know, you don't, you know, I don't think you do enough, spend, as I said, that quality time is there, but you think 'Oh I need to do the washing and I need to...'. Whereas, when they're in their bed you could put the washing on. And if you just take that wee ten minutes to just sit down with them.

Almost all the parents believed that participating in the project had supported them in establishing more of a 'reading routine' with their children and they talked about the positive impact on the quality of these reading sessions (see Figures 8 to 11 children's drawings of book sharing in the home). The following quotations from two different parents demonstrate instances of increased book sharing and evidence of how parents were trying to establish a regular reading routine:

I think I'm sitting down with them more and reading definite, a hundred percent definitely. Because, as I say, I think you do, you just get ... you do, don't you when you've got three? You just think, 'Oh bed, bath, clothes ironed for the morning and you know you forget'. There's that wee time that instead of sitting watching the news you could be sitting with them after their dinner, before they go for their bath and just reading. It takes ten to fifteen minutes to sit and they're ... they're happy.

We've always had like a kind of enjoyment of reading to the kids. But, I think now that obviously doing all this and being, being part of it and involved and seeing all the different things it's made it more enjoyable. You are like, 'Right go and get your book', 'cause you feel that you are really giving that good input into their wee lives with reading these books. And it's like, I mean every night I'm always like, 'Come on let's get a book,' and 'Come on, read that to me'. And, you know, it's more, it's more positive.

In another instance a parent reported that since taking part in the project she had made a 'conscious effort' to read to her children on a regular basis. She believed that this was 'important' and she said that she was enjoying 'spending that kind of quality time' with them.

One parent believed that there were many benefits of setting up this daily reading routine including that her children were 'calmer'. She said:

And they do love sitting listening to you. Doing it every day, I think it makes them calmer. You forget how much they just sit there and they listen to every word you are saying. And wait, you know, for you to get to their favourite bit.



Figure 8: 'Mummy reading a story'



Figure 9: *'Me reading to my mummy'*

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 10: *'Reading to my mummy'*

Figure 11: 'Reading to Mum'

One parent, who believed that her involvement in the project had 'brought it all back', summed up the view of many in the group who thought that this new experience of writing the book had reminded them of how enjoyable reading with their children could be. Moreover, a striking feature of the data collected was parents' comments about a new sense of enthusiasm around book sharing with their children. This was the unanimous view of the group. From their comments it seemed that momentum had built around book sharing as a result of their involvement in discussions about their children's favourite books, borrowing new books to take home and observing the positive response from their children which, in turn, impacted positively on their own sense of enjoyment when reading to their children.

Everybody was speaking about what books their kids liked, I forgot, like, you kind of forget, you know, because David did, he used to love me sitting reading to him, but then another one comes along, and then you kind of forget again. And it's just, kind of, looking at all the books and everything, and taking a couple of books back home with me and they got all excited.

She [the Author] brought books ... and we were just allowed to take them away with us. So I took a book for each of the kids and then that kind of got me back into it. I said, 'Wait till you see what I've got for you today!' and I showed them the books. So that kind of spurred me on that night, to sit and go like that, 'Right, look and see' and then, you know, they got their book bags last week so we were reading the pirate book the other day that was in the Pirate bag.

As already noted, almost all of the parents said that taking part in the project had motivated them to establish reading routines. Furthermore a recurring theme of the

interviews were reports that when these routines were established parents claimed to be enjoying reading sessions more than they had before. One parent talking about her involvement in the project explained:

I think that's what really made me say, 'No I'm going to do this' and I mean my kids' books are always out and the second I started to show interest in that again, and the second I started to relax and read the stories and stop getting all worked up because they're all fighting over it and things. And now, I'm like, I'm dead relaxed with them, and I'm like do you know we'll go with the flow. We'll do it your way, we'll do it this way as long as you're all getting a shot and I think it's because I enjoy it now.

Many of the parents spoke positively about now often reading together as 'a whole family' with everyone joining in the reading. One mother described sitting with her two children:

I just love it 'cause I've got one on one side and one on the other ... sitting like this reading the book. And I mean when else do you get that kind of time?

Another described her whole family's enjoyment of taking part in reading *Room on the Broom*. She went on to explain that she felt she was reading with much more expression and that her children had responded positively to this and that it was 'much more fun.'

And we were getting right into the characters and I was saying to him, 'and then ...' and he would go, 'whoosh!' [laughing]. And we were all sitting and we were all doing something and you ... I think you just forget, how you know, they get right into it, you know how their wee imaginations work ... how good it is for kids to be in that wee bit, you know. And I think you just forget. I think life gets dead busy and you know you just forget to sit and take five minutes with them.

Some parents also reported that older children read stories to them, and that siblings read to each other. Data gathered during conversations with children and from their drawings also showed examples of these practices (Figure 12 and 13). During a conversation with one of the children, when asked to draw a picture showing who read to him at home, he drew a picture showing his whole family involved in story reading. He said that when his mum read a story to him and his brother it was a story that they both liked, but when he read a story to his baby brother he choose his brother's 'best

one' called *That's Not My Dragon*. Talking about his brother's favourite book he offered the information that his brother liked 'the touchy feely one.'



Figure 12: *A child's drawing of his family reading together*

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 13: *'Reading with my brother'*

2.7. Parents' Approaches to Book Sharing At Home

Almost all the parents claimed to be reading with more confidence, enthusiasm and expression. There was evidence that they could recognise techniques that authors used and how these could support their own reading of the book. For example, they reported emphasising the rhythm and the rhyme and taking account of the size of text to indicate volume and tone. The following quotations from different parents illustrate their perceptions of the changes in the way they engaged with, and read a picture book:

I get right into now. So, like especially books that I already know like 'I'm Not Cute', because I know what's coming. I can do the voices and I can do all the wee kind of animation bit. Like the big words and do a big loud voice and things like that.

Probably take more time to sort of have a read at it myself. First to look at the structures to see sort of the rhyme and whatever. Whereas, normally, I'd get half way through it and realise, 'Oh I should be saying it this way'.

It's now we get the chance to sit down and just really get stuck into a book, kind of thing. Really bring it alive, I suppose, for them. So, although I could do the characters before, I really try harder now.

Another parent stressed that she was now using a different approach from the one she had used with her older daughter. She believed that because of this change her son was getting into the idea of the rhyme and the rhythm of when to turn the page. She explained:

If I make it into the rhythm he'll realise well, now it's time to turn the page. It's definitely the sort of the rhythm and the rhyming is definitely something we've learned from [the Author] in the activities.

During the interviews the parents described other ways they had changed their approaches to storytelling with their children. They talked about how they were scrutinising books, encouraging interactions around text and paying close attention to illustrations, as the following indicate:

She [the Author] just explained the front and the end pages, I mean, I never would have read them to my kids or pointed anything like that out. You do pick up a bit more of how to go into the book.

And now obviously you see how much work [the Author's] put in. I put a wee bit more time, say, 'Right well this is the author and this is their name'.

I would say probably, I mean I would have read before but I probably put a bit more kind of enthusiasm into it, you know. And kind of sounds and talk more about the kind of book and say, 'Oh, do you see this and can you see what's happening here or what do you think's going to happen next?' Other than just kind of going through a book page to page. Where it makes it a bit more exciting I think as well 'cause you are kind of talking with them. Kind of showing them what's in the book and then asking them what they think. Their opinion on it as well.

And getting them to look more at the pictures ... Like sometimes you've got like wee bits hiding in the background.

It's just kind of pointing they wee things out. So you kind of, he starts to look a wee bit further into just the basic, what's sticking out on the page kind of thing.

One parent described how the language activities had supported her storytelling at home as it 'got us into the way of how we would describe things for children' and she gave the following example of playing with language and using her child's name:

And I think now that we've done that, instead of just saying well, making, putting them into the story. And saying 'Well John went to the shop'. You could say 'Silly sausage John went to the shop'. Or 'Dancing diva Francesca went out to play' and things. So you can use your imagination more and make a bigger story out of it.

All of the parents believed that one of the most significant outcomes of the project was that taking part in the workshops had resulted in them becoming more aware of how a picture book is 'put together'. The parents discussed this at length, highlighting a range of things that they said they had not thought about before. A key finding was the parents also claimed that they were talking to their children about this and using their new knowledge to explain all the different aspects. Summing this up, one parent said:

I feel it's given me a bit more kind of understanding about a book in general. How it's all put together. A wee bit more kind of appreciation for how much hard work is involved in a book 'cause before you just pick up a book and you just read it, but now you kind of look at it and you go, 'Oh that's done like that and that's like ...'. You know you kind of go through the pages and you can understand the work that's involved in it. That's more for me, I would say it's a more an appreciation of a book in general. How much work's put in and involved in it and being able to explain that to the kids that you know you're, talking about the author and you're and you're talking about the illustrator and you're talking about like how the ... the work's done and the ... the different detail in the pictures and things like that as well.

Many of the parents also reported that they were now looking at books in a different way and 'thinking about the meaning' of a book and believed that this had changed the way that they read a book to their children. As a result of studying and looking much more closely at books the parents thought that they were spending more quality time during book reading at home. As one parent related, before the project she would just

pick up a book, read it and close the book. She then went on to describe the way her behaviour had changed:

Whereas, now you kind of look into it a wee bit more, you read it and you're looking at every page and thinking, 'Oh that's wrote like that and that's done there' and you're looking at the pages and 'Oh, and look at this on this page'. Aye, you kind of take in all the detail and the images and you look at it I think a wee bit more and appreciate how much work is involved.

When asked if they thought they were spending more time reading a book because of this sustained talk one parent replied:

I would say so, yeah. I would say so. I'd say you take more time over it and going over it and being able to ... you can actually talk more about it, more of an understanding of it.

It seemed that as a result of taking part in the project the parents talked to their children about what they were doing in the group and linked this to their book reading at home. When one parent was asked if she had mentioned working with the Author to her child, she responded:

He knew what an author does. He knows, 'cause he'll ask you, 'Is it a man or a woman, mum?'. 'Well this one's a man' and there's a picture of a woman, a name of a woman as well. You know how sometimes there's two, it's like somebody's illustrated it. And I've got to explain the illustrator.

2.8. Parents' Views About the Importance of Reading to Children

A recurring theme in the interviews was the parents claiming to now have a deeper awareness of the importance of reading in their children's lives and the positive impact it can have. Many parents offered examples of how taking part in the activities and the discussions within the group had, in their view, changed their thinking. In one instance, a parent recalled a piece the Author had read to them about someone's memory of being read to as a child, and how she thought that might have had a real impact on anyone in the group who did not read to their children:

She brought in one time that wee passage out of a book and it was talking about this wee boy, and how much he likes, you know, that time with his mum to sit down and read a book. And it made you actually kind of say 'Oh God!', you know. And I think anybody that maybe didn't read, that would have totally changed their mind on reading, reading to their child.

It is worth noting that during an interview with the Author she corroborated the importance that the above parent had placed on this story. At the end of the project when the Author was talking about parents' reports of increased confidence and her views on the most positive aspects of the project she referred to a conversation with this parent:

She was talking about, you know, feeling much more confident and she'd, she remembered a thing that I'd read out that had been, it had been a wee bit of text written by someone about what he remembered when he was a child, of his mum reading to him and how special that was. And she said that night she went home and she was, 'Right we're going to read'. You know, even just that one thing.

There were many examples of parents reflecting on how the sessions with the Author had heightened their awareness of the importance of children's books, how books can support children's learning, children's enjoyment of being read to and that the time spent sharing books was 'quality time'. The following are two examples of these kind of reflections:

So, it just makes you think that [the Author] is quite good at making you aware of how important it is. And how really they do get a lot, obviously they learn a lot from it. I know they learn through play and things as well. But, you just, a book is just like, it's no just even the learning. It's quality time.

... not realising how much kids really, fully, probably enjoy reading as much. I mean most of our kids kind of enjoy reading, but probably not realising as much, how much they do actually enjoy sitting, you sitting down with your time, sitting with them reading a book, you know. And them being able to understand it that wee bit.

Parents described how they were 'thinking about books' in a different way. They spoke about having more of an understanding of how different kinds of books were written and a typical view expressed by the group is encapsulated in the following quotation from a parent who was speaking about how her thinking had changed. She said that she now had:

... more awareness of how much it takes to write one and how much thought goes into writing books.

For some parents working with the author and taking part in discussions during the sessions seemed to have prompted reflections of reading books when they were children. In the following example, one parent spoke emotionally about how her involvement in the project had triggered a memory of reading a favourite book when she was at school. She then went on to link her childhood memory with how she imagined her son felt when he was reading:

It's, I think, [the Author] and it's the way she speaks about books. She's really, really passionate about books, and the things that we've talked about, you know, about reading to kids and the difference it can make, and just all different things all through those, like those couple of months that we've doing it, kind of reminds you, you know ... and I remember reading books, I remember a book that I read when I was at school, and do you know I still remember that book, and I still think about that book 'cause it was my favourite book. And I can remember being ... and I think that's how he gets in to it, because I remember the way that my imagination used to go when I read this book when we were at school, and I think 'Oh, that's probably the way he is when he's reading they books'.

For some parents with older children reflections focused on thinking back to time spent reading to their children when they were younger. One parent who felt that she had spent a lot of time reading with her son speculated on whether this had impacted positively on his enjoyment of reading independently now that he was older. She said:

Whereas, I don't know, if I hadn't read to him as much, whether he would like just sitting reading. Do you know what I mean?

2.9. Seeing Things from a Child's Perspective

A very interesting finding that emerged from the interview data was that many of the parents believed that taking part in the project had encouraged them to see things from a child's perspective. They viewed this as important, because as one interviewee emphasised:

Weans see it [the world] in a totally different light to what we see it.

When asked if she had any advice for groups taking part in similar projects in the future another parent said that her only suggestion would be to 'just try and get into the

mindset of a child.’ This view was echoed by another interviewee when asked the same question. She said:

And I think to get, to let yourself get into it, I think you need to kind of chill out and just, you know, relax. And I would say just like think the way a child would think, you know.

Other parents explained that trying to see things through their children’s eyes had impacted on the way they selected books for their children. This is illustrated in the following comments from two parents:

I’m tending now to pick up books and look at these things and be more observant of things that might be attractive to my daughter. You know and thinking ‘Well how is she going to see that’ ... trying to see it through her eyes.

To me it’s ... it’s been more informative for me on what she likes as a child. So it’s helped me sort of understand.

As already noted it seems that participating in the project had an impact on the way that the group viewed children’s books. Many reported that their involvement in the writing had highlighted the need to take account of how children see the world when creating a story. The following comment demonstrates this new understanding:

I didn’t think that much effort had went in to creating a kid’s book. There’s a lot of the psychology behind it as well, you know, and trying to get, trying to get into a child’s mind.

According to many of the parents taking part in the activities that the Author had organised to support their writing of the picture book had helped them to ‘remember what it was like’ being a child. As one commented, it was ‘like getting into the child mode again’. Another parent offered a vivid description of how she believed that her participation in the ‘wee exercises’ had helped her think about how a child views their world.

... like the wee exercises she’s [the Author] kind of stripped back to what you remember as being a child. And like how they would think about, like well, we would look at something and go, ‘Oh, that’s just a whatever’. Where a child would look at that and go, ‘Oh’, and they would see ten different things’.

A common view was that taking part in the activities and their involvement in the process of creating the book had stimulated the parents' imagination. As one interviewee commented:

Well it's fired our imagination which in turn fires your child's

During the interviews a few parents in the group said that they sometimes found it difficult to understand what their young children meant when they were trying to explain something. It is worth noting that one of these parents believed that the discussions in the group about trying to see things from a child's perspective had impacted positively on the way she related to her own children. She described a conversation with her child when she had found it difficult to grasp what he was trying to say. She explained that she had taken time to let him talk and eventually had understood him. Summing up her approach she said:

I kind of zoned into what he was trying to say.

2.10. Trying Out and Developing New Literacy Practices

There is evidence to suggest that new experiences at the workshops gave the parents increased confidence to try out and develop new literacy practices. The Author reported that the parents had told her that they were trying out the different activities at home with their children. She noted that one parent who was absent one week asked the Author if she could detail the activity she had missed in the newsletter because she had enjoyed doing the activities at home.

During one session the group were exploring the contents of the Bookbug packs. Talking about the blank storybook in the Bookbug Toddler pack initiated further discussion about the possibility of making a scrapbook with their children at home. As a result of this discussion, one parent described how she had extended this idea and had also personalised the activity for her daughter. She said:

So, I'll write the story for Juliette and she'll draw the picture and we'll talk about it. We do that. I got that idea last week and she really took to that. She really enjoys that. I got a wee scrapbook and put ribbon on it and made it fancy for her. And we do that each day ... I'll put her words into a story.

When asked if she had done this before with her daughter she explained it was the first time they had made up their own stories.

In a similar vein another parent described getting an idea from one of the Author's books where the Author had included aspects of her home life in the storyline. The parent said that she was thinking about making a book with her son using photographs with his own stuffed animal toys. She was aware of the positive impact that personalising the book for her son could have and she offered a rationale for this approach:

But, if like that character Woof Woof was in the book, he would relate to it more than if it was just, you know, a generic dog.

One parent reported that taking part in the activities about rhymes had encouraged her to sing with her children and this was now a popular activity in the family. Laughing, she described her children on the bus all shouting 'Mum, sing Twinkle Twinkle!'

During one of the workshops the parents gained insights into the Author's craft as an illustrator when she used her laptop to show how her drawings were constructed using a computer programme. One parent commented:

I quite liked the thing that we did last week with the different drawings and trying to make up a story. And, especially nowadays with computers it would be so much easier for them to like pick a subject, make a story and get them to put it out and like, do you know what I mean, make like the start and end to a story with pictures. So, I thought that was quite a good exercise to do with the children.

There were several other examples of the workshops acting as a stimulus for literacy practices in the home. When the group discussed the possibility of the focus of the book being about cats and dogs, one parent got her children to draw cats and dogs at home and commented that their drawings were totally different. Another parent referred to the Author's use of post-its as storytelling technique and said:

I feel some of the wee little techniques she's, like with the post-its ... to make up a story. Like when she did the setting and mixed them all up to make a different story. I've done things like that. We've kind of like made a little play with his toys out of it. Just stuff like that to try and keep his attention. So it's quite good. I like learning those techniques.

In the interviews some of the parents described how the Author's ideas about storytelling had helped them approach storytelling 'in an imaginative way' as the following comments suggest:

I can pack up everything that we've learned and put it into a story for, like through my imagination, and stuff like that. So, yes definitely it's been, it's been great ... it's made a great difference to us.

I mean, before I used to open books and aye I love reading to my kids constantly. But I'd open books and it'd just be reading like words out of a page. And it had meaning to the kids, but now we can make up our own stories using stuff that we've all learnt. So it's great, it's great.

There were instances of the different elements of the Residency interweaving. During the project two parents attended Bookbug sessions in local libraries for the first time after being told about them by the Author. For one of these parents it was because the Author had told her that she was going to take part in the Bookbug session. Both parents reported positively on the experience as the following comments indicate:

That was my first. I had, I didn't actually know that it existed. So that, that was actually very good because it was interactive for my daughter.

But it gave me ideas of the way that the Bookbug session went, the things that I can do at home.

There were a few reports of increased visits to the library by the families over the course of the project. One parent claimed that this was as a result of being exposed to a wider range of books supplied by the Author. She said:

We used to go to the library once a month but now we go kind of every week. And we request books and stuff. 'Cause [the Author's] brought in some really interesting and good books. 'Cause Jack's really interested in books. You know at night it's like seven, eight books we'll read before bed and stuff like that. So, and we do request a lot of books from the library. I think instead of just being like the generic top ten that we read now, I'm trying to get older, better, more unusual books in as well.

As part of the project a trip to the theatre production of *A Room on the Broom* was organised. For many of the parents taking the children to the theatre was a new experience and they noted that this was an activity that they would like to repeat. All of the parents reported that the day had been a great success and the following comment sums up the views of the parents:

I think it's, you know, to see how the kids were interacting with it and everything, it was really, really good. And it was just somebody basically telling a story. They said they absolutely loved it. It was fun.

The Family Group Worker noted that all the parents had read the book *A Room on the Broom* with their children in advance of the performance to keep the 'children focused by pointing out detail and similarities to the story'. She went on:

I am not convinced this trip would have gone so well before the project. Huge, positive, lots of texts and Facebook posts saying thanks ... 'Just saying thanks for a great day today, I've just put him to bed and read Room on the Broom again'. It was fabulous everybody had read the book before they went so they knew the storyline. They'd familiarised the children with the story, which is all the things we'd talked about.

One parent related how her children were given money from their grandmother for holiday spending and she said that the children would usually spend this money on 'sweeties'. However, instead of this both her children purchased books to take on holiday and the younger child choose *A Room on the Broom*. She described his behaviour in the shop:

He went straight for it. And he's like that 'Mum look! Mum look!'

According to the Family Group Worker there were other 'significant events', which had evolved from the project that showed that for the parents books and literacy were high on the agenda. The Family Group Worker reported some parents had purchased the Author's book for her to sign, some parents had decided to buy books as gifts for Christmas 'not only for their own children but for nephews and nieces and cousins' and at the naming ceremony for one of the children the invited parents had gifted books and a book token. In the last session before Christmas four parents spontaneously brought in books and poems (such as *The Night Before Christmas*) to share with the group. The Family Group Worker described how one of the parents had brought her baby to the group wearing an outfit with the words and pictures from *The*

Very Hungry Caterpillar printed on it and, ‘sort of snaking his armpit’ (Figure 14). The Family Group Worker said because of the theme of the workshops *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* was a book that they had discussed quite regularly during the project. She described it as a ‘bridging book’ because, as she put it, ‘most of us read it as children as well as having read it to our children’. She went on:

It was really lovely and just the fact that one, she’d seen it, two, she’d bought it and three that she’s worn it for the group.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 14: *Photograph of ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ outfit*

2.11. Parents’ Observations of their Children’s Early Literacy Behaviour

An important finding was that in the final interviews some of the parents offered detailed examples of their children’s early literacy behaviour. A striking feature of the way they described these observations was that the parents seemed to recognise the significance of the events in terms of their children’s early literacy development and the data suggests that they valued and understood the importance of these events.

The following is an excerpt from an example of one of these detailed observations:

You couldn't get him to sit down and read a book, but now he's quite into kind of books that I think are even a wee bit older than what he would sit for. And he likes rhyming books and I find a lot of the time it might not even matter about the illustrations. He likes the words of it. Because there's a lot of times I catch him just sitting attempting to read by himself. You see him sitting on his bed with his books and stuff ... he turns the page, he goes through it. And he'll remember a wee bit of the story and kind of say what's coming up next if you know what I mean, when I'm not there. He'll kind of still remember what's coming. So, it's quite good. He's kind of skewered away from the kind of younger books as well, which I think is quite good. You know, the simpler books. He's kind of on to like I'd say ones, with rhymes and stuff.

In the above example the parent has considered the kind of books that her child likes and points out that it is not necessarily the illustrations that appeal to him but the words. She also noted the development in his selection of books, moving on from what she describes as the 'younger books'. She identified a range of early reading behaviours, including attempting to read independently, turning the pages, remembering text and predicting what is coming next. From her comments it seems that she values this behaviour and has recognised key indicators of her child's early literacy development.

Another parent appeared to understand the importance in terms of early reading development of having a favourite book that was read 'over and over again.' Talking about a book from her child's Bookbug pack, she said he kept asking for it to be read to him and that it was 'just great' that he had only had it for three weeks, but 'now he knows it' and could 'say it all off by heart'.

One parent described how she had observed her son retelling one of his favourite stories to a friend and that he had changed the name of the main character in the story to that of his friend, just as his mother changed the names when they read the story together.

The two of them are sitting on the bed cuddling each other, and we just peeked in to see what they were doing, thinking they were watching a DVD and they weren't. He's telling her a story about Pirate Liam and Pirate Amy 'cause that's her name. So he'd changed the names. Like we used to do with him, like Pirate Liam, Ross and Scott. So he changed it to Pirate Liam and Pirate Amy. And he's telling her this big story and all about these pirates. And he was that proud of himself, so he was. He says 'Mum, I just told Amy that story' and oh, he was dead proud of himself!

Discussing her observations of her child's positive response to a book another parent made connections with her experience of working with the Author. She described how her child loved the book *Hairy Macleary* and she believed that this was because the book used a range of techniques that had been explained by the Writer in Residence and explored in the group. She reported that knowledge of these techniques had helped her when selecting books for her daughter. She said:

It's made me aware of things that are more useful for her and she's come on leaps and bounds, so yeah it has, it's made a great difference for us.

Highlighting the rhyming and rhythm, and the links with illustrations in *Hairy Macleary* the same parent offered insightful comments about how she believed these techniques supported her child's interaction with the book. The following excerpt from her observation seems to build on her experiences in the group and it is worth noting that she coined the interesting phrase 'hearing catching' to describe the book's impact on her daughter:

... that takes it back to what she [the Author] said, like the rhyming and how the sort of rhythm of the story runs, and whatever, and it makes it more, not so much eye catching but hearing catching for Francesca because she's picking up on the words and, the sort of like, the rhyme and the sort of movement of the words. So, therefore, when she's seeing the pictures she's associating how the words run with the pictures ... like I say, I keep harping back to 'Hairy Macleary', it's good because the illustration goes very well with the words.

She then went on to discuss the importance of 'repetitiveness' in children's books, another technique that she said had been discussed by the Author:

So she's picking up because of the repetitiveness of it. So, the more she gets the repetitiveness the more it sticks in her head and she repeats, which is all part of the learning curve, isn't it?

2.12. Reflecting on the Process

At the end of the project the parents were able and willing to reflect on the process they had gone through in writing the book. There were many discussions about their new knowledge and understanding, the ‘learning curve’ they had experienced and the ‘ups and downs’ of the project. The following dialogue illustrates these points:

- Parent 1* You know that you're having to deal with editors and publishers and ...
Parent 2 and that's it
Parent 1 new ideas ...
Parent 2 yeah, they did... you didn't obviously know anything about really
Parent 1 I mean you didn't ... you didn't know
Parent 2 you just saw that somebody wrote a book ...
Parent 1 put it into a publisher, they published it and that was that.
Parent 2 So to a certain extent we've, we've, it's been a good learning curve for us as well because we have learned the process and the hard work and the disappointment and then the elation that we're, we've finally got there.

Parents talked at length about how taking part in the project had ‘opened their eyes’ to the complex process involved in creating a book for young children. Summing up the view of the group, one parent said that the Author had given them ‘a stronger insight into the work that goes into writing a picture book’. They explained that they now realised that although there might not be ‘many words’ in a children’s picture book, someone had ‘thought hard about choosing them’ and how they were ‘arranged’ on the page. Discussing this theme one parent said:

I think because it's like simple words and simple you know kind of things, so you ... you don't realise that there's an awful lot of work goes into it ... the finished article.

Another parent noted:

Just the way, the way the wording is done as well, it's quite ... it's quite interesting like when I would just pick a book up before and read it. Whereas, now I would look at it and say, 'Yeah that's ... that's why that's worded like that'.

Near the end of the project, after many weeks work, the Family Group worker described what she felt was a significant point in the process. She explained that it was the moment when the storyboard of text and illustrations was displayed on the wall of

the community centre. She identified this as the moment when the parents could first visualise the finished book and she described the scene as the book ‘coming alive’ for the group. She reported that from her observations and the parents comments she believed that this moment had made a ‘huge impact’ on the group. She noted, for example, hearing one parent saying, ‘I’ve got shivers going down my spine’ and another exclaiming ‘it looks like a proper book’.

The parents were able to reflect on how they had reached this point in the development of the book. They looked back at ‘the long period in the middle’ after the initial concept was rejected when they felt that they ‘were really not getting anywhere’ and when, as one parent said:

We’d be sitting all day struggling you know trying to get a story between us.

They talked about how ‘all of a sudden, it kind of came together’ after ‘all the weeks of doing different things.’ Summing up the feelings of the group one parent explained:

And you’re like ‘Wow! The last few weeks it’s really come to an end, you know. You can see all the images in place and the wording and how it’s going to look. You can actually kind of start seeing the finished result now. It’s quite ... it’s quite good, quite interesting how it’s got to where it’s got to.

While another said:

If you sort of look back on the whole year, I mean it’s been sort of like a ... a steady path of sort of up and down.

It is important to note that there was a lot of discussion amongst parents during the interviews about the moment when they knew they had finished the book. There was a clear sense that they recognised the point when their work was complete and they had ‘done it’ and as one member of the group said ‘it was there’.

The parents talked knowledgably and confidently about the process they had gone through in writing the book. As they reflected on the experience they highlighted the key role that the Author had played in explaining things and supporting them along the way. The parents praised the Author’s expertise and the way that she had involved them in the activities in the workshop sessions and ‘got the best’ from them. The

parents noted the connections between the activities they had undertaken during the project and the final book. The following statement by a parent at the end of the project powerfully captures the feelings of the group:

See, when it comes down to it, see the way that she pulled things out of us that we didn't even know we were doing at the time. The way that she was saying, 'Well if we do this then ...' She did it really, really well so you might think that, 'Oh this is a bit naff and this is a bit stupid' but really it's not. You just give a hundred percent and in the end you'll see where it's all ... what it's all been about and why we've done these wee silly things all the way along the line.

Key professionals believed that the authentic nature of the project had been a significant factor in what they believed to be the success of the project. The Family Group Worker talked about the importance for the group of having been involved in this real-life situation of going through the process of getting a book published. She spoke about the experience of submitting their idea to the publisher, dealing with rejection, meeting the editor and having their ideas questioned. The Author described it as 'a proper project, not like a pretend project' and she felt this had had a direct influence on their confidence. She said:

They're confident, feeling more confident. And I think that's because it's been a real project as well, you know. That it's authentic.

Representatives from Scottish Book Trust were of the opinion that the initiative was 'more than just a writing project' because the group were involved in creating 'an actual book that's going to be sold.' They believed that because the project was underpinned by 'a real purpose' there was the potential to 'learn a lot more' and that other Home-Start family groups would get to hear about their achievements and could benefit from a similar experience.

2.13. Collaboration

Evidence suggests that a key strength of the project was the collaboration between the Author, the Home-Start Family Group Worker and the parent group. The Author was clear from the start of the project about the approach she wanted to use. She recognised that it would be a challenge, however, she felt strongly that the inspiration for the book should come from the work of the group and she was committed to the parents being 'completely involved' in the writing process.

The approach used by the Author seemed to have resulted in the parents feeling that everyone had contributed and there was a strong sense of 'being part of it' and that they were going to 'achieve something at the end of it'. They talked about 'working together' with the Author and feeling, as one parent said, 'she's like one of us'. They viewed the Author as someone who gave them 'guidance' and 'valued all of their suggestions'. The following quotation sums up this belief as well as articulating their views about the sensitive way the author had supported them and valued their contributions:

... and if we say anything it's noted down right away. And we've got like big kind of pictures, big A4 bits of paper and all the rest of it up on the wall. And any notes that any of us make, no matter how small it is, it's put on there. And then we try and bring it all kind of, all together so that everybody's got input into it. There's nobody that I would say that's no getting anything. Or even if they're shy, she'll be like 'right what do you think?'. Everybody joins in. There's nobody I would say that, that's no had, put some sort of bits of information into it.

The parents' description of the sessions suggest that the Author skilfully got them to reflect on their contributions. At the same time she shared her experience of working with a publisher which reinforced the authentic nature of the project.

And even if it doesn't make any sense she still puts it up and she'll maybe delicately say 'well we'll maybe just go back this way a wee bit.' So she's quite delicate in how she's telling us it doesn't maybe fit in or it's not quite the right age. And she'll tell us 'Well I don't know, if I take that to them [the publisher] they might tell me ...'. It's just good 'cause then she's making us aware that things that can't go in books that you probably weren't aware of before.

The Author commented on the 'enthusiasm' of the group and how they were all 'keen to contribute'.

A range of evidence gathered points to the good working relationships and mutual respect that developed among the participants during the project as they engaged in the process of creating the children's book.

Talking about her experience of working collaboratively with the parents to create the book, the Author highlighted the key role played by the Family Group Worker in this

process. She stressed, 'I couldn't have done it without her'. The Author believed that the Family Group Worker's support had been very important because she knew the group, participated in sessions, and offered feedback and encouraged her when the Author felt sessions had not been going so well. She valued this reassurance and reported that the Family Group Worker had told her 'this is the kind of group that would tell you or they would vote with their feet if they weren't enjoying it'.

It is interesting to note that working on the book appears to have also strengthened relationships within the parent group. Almost all the parents believed that, as one put it, 'working towards the same end' had impacted positively on relationships. Parents used the phrase 'it's brought us together' when discussing the project and one of the parents believed that this was the 'most significant thing'. The following quotes from three different interviewees are representative of the parents' perceptions:

And pulling together as ... as a team to get the job done.

It's actually opened our eyes to the likes of our relationships within the group.

We've made a better connection with other people in the group ... brought us together, yeah.

The Family Group Worker supported the parents' view and she talked about the way the group had 'bonded even more' during the course of the project.

It is important to note that a key challenge for the Author in terms of the collaborative nature of the project was that for her, writing and illustrating were normally solitary activities and the project required the Author to share this process with other adults. She explained that for her working with other adults was 'a completely new thing' and she laughed as she went on to say:

I think for me, as the sort of creative person used to working on my own ... it's quite hard to sort of let go of the control.

The Family Group Worker also recognised the challenges faced by the Author who she described as normally being a 'lone worker' and she understood the challenges of having to share the creative experience with the group. She recognised that for everyone involved in the project, it was 'a big emotional involvement'.

2.14. Balancing the Demands of the Project and the Needs of the Group

The Family Group Worker discussed the key challenge that she had faced during the project. She explained that her priorities were the needs of the group and the individuals, and making sure that the group was fulfilling its purpose, which was to support the parents. She stressed the importance of keeping the focus on the core support which 'the organisation was set up to do'. She spoke about having some anxieties because:

... the nature of a support group is that people have been referred to come for support ... just because you've put something else in place doesn't mean they don't need support.

It is important to note that before the start of the project the Family Group Worker had discussed with the Author the need to build time into the sessions for the normal business of the group. She had also had a discussion with Scottish Book Trust and had reached agreement that there could be a break from working on the book when necessary. She explained:

You've got to make sure parents aren't going home after the Wednesday morning going 'I really didn't get the chance to ask about that or to say that'. And that did make me anxious and I knew that the parents were a little anxious about that ... but I also knew that we could manage it because I'd spoken to them [Author and Scottish Booktrust] and said, 'can we pull back if necessary, because families sometimes go into crisis?'

The above is one example from the evidence gathered that demonstrated how well the Family Group Worker knew the needs of this well-established group. This forward planning proved to be very worthwhile as it became apparent that during the first phase of the project all members of the group were unanimous about a need for a break to discuss things other than the book. As one parent explained:

Oh, it would be nice just to be able to go and have a cup of tea and a chat 'cause I think we're all going through things, you know. And it's good to have that wee break every couple of weeks just to talk about things, 'cause as much as I love doing the book, sometimes if there's something on your mind ...

During the first phase of the project another parent stressed that sometimes the sessions

were not long enough to fit in both time for work on the book and to discuss personal issues. She said:

You know, issues that maybe have come up that we want to talk about or air with the group. Our sessions with [the Author] have not been long enough because by the time we all get down and have a coffee ...

Furthermore, a few members of the group found the intensity of the sessions a challenge at times and this was the reason that they wanted a break. One parent in particular who was new to the group commented:

'Cause it can be a long time and if we're, you know, physically doing stuff. And you are having to use your brain for that kind of two hours. I mean I enjoyed it all and it was good learning, but I was a wee bit kind of funny.

Both Home-Start professionals interviewed discussed the point in the project when they had decided to stop sessions for a week 'to address the personal issues coming up'. Talking about the parents, they recognised that these issues were 'affecting their engagement' with the project. Reflecting back on her decision the Family Group Worker said, 'I called a halt to it for a week and then we got back on track'. She went on to report:

Things are going well now, we did take a break a couple of weeks ago because the families needed a bit of time to just get some issues aired and various other things.

She felt that it was important to emphasise that the parents were really enjoying the project and saw the main challenge of her role as the facilitator of the group to make sure that the right balance was reached during the sessions. She believed that this was important, firstly for the parents, but also in terms of supporting the Author's work with the group. She explained:

So, I really think that was the main thing, it's about getting that balance right to make sure people do still get time because they love the project and love the activities and [the Author] would have been feeling kind of 'Oh, what's going on here?' you know, 'They're not engaging at the start or at the end'.

The Family Group Worker felt her views were listened to and that Scottish Book Trust had responded very positively to the request for a break in the project. When

interviewed, Scottish Book Trust representatives talked about this incident and discussed the importance of having this kind of flexibility within the project. They felt that this had contributed in some way to the success of the project and that they would recommend that future projects ‘keep that flexibility’ of approach.

2.15. The Author’s Role

During the course of the project the Author suggested that it would have been helpful to have discussions with another author who had taken part in a similar initiative. She felt that it would have been ‘great’ to have a ‘creative’ person to ‘bounce ideas off’ and also to have liaised with someone who was connected with the nurseries.

Echoing the Author’s comments, Scottish Book Trust representatives discussed the possibility, in future projects, of involving another professional who had undertaken a similar residency. They also suggested involving another author or illustrator ‘at a different stage in their career to give feedback’.

Scottish Book Trust representatives reflecting on the initiative said that they had offered the Author support when needed, but that in future Writer in Residence projects they would think about setting up ‘stronger’, ‘more formalised’ support structures for the author. They thought that an approach used in some of their education projects where an established author is paired with a new author and a teacher might be ‘a good model to use in the future’.

It was recognised that there had also been some challenges for the Author in terms of ‘time pressures’. The project involved other strands over and above the work with the parent group and both the Author and the Family Group Worker suggested that perhaps a more focused approach would have been more manageable. Scottish Book Trust representatives acknowledged that this had been ‘an ambitious project’ that had aimed to extend the work of the author into the community and they reported that they planned to consider the scope of any similar projects undertaken in the future.

It was clear from the parents’ comments that they had built up a very positive relationship with the Author and had reflected on her role and her contribution to the

project. For example, they believed that she had ‘fitted in really well’, ‘gone over and above just being an author’ and had ‘brought life’ to the project.

It is worth noting that the Family Group Worker believed that it had been ‘clear from the start that the group had bonded’ with the Author. Similarly, Scottish Book Trust representatives also noted that they knew ‘from the first stage that she seemed very much at home with the group and that she seemed to ‘be more of a friend to them’. They stressed the collaborative nature of the relationship between the Author and the group:

... you could see that she wasn't just coming in as an author and a professional. She was coming in as someone who also wanted to learn from the parents in the group.

The Author described her residency as having been an ‘enriching experience’ and felt that her time spent around the parents and the children had been ‘really good’ for her and that she had ‘absorbed loads’ which she believed would ‘come out in other things’. She believed that the residency had offered her a really good opportunity to work with parents and children and she stressed that as an author this had been significant because, as she said, ‘I was getting to meet my audience’. She reported that she had ‘gained more experience of author visits’ and thought that the residency might have raised her profile.

It is interesting to note that on a personal level, according to the Author her involvement in the residency had made a very positive impact on her own learning and her awareness of the role that booksharing can play in terms of parent and child bonding. She discussed how this new awareness would influence how she worked. She spoke at length about this and the following excerpt offers an insight into her thinking:

I think I'm getting loads out of it. I think it's just really opened my eyes to loads of things. I mean not just in terms of writing. First of all, the first thing that happened I think I read loads of research about Early Years and Child Development. And that really opened my eyes to the potential that books have in this sort of experience of the bonding and sort of attachment with parents and children. So, from that point of view, I think from now on, I don't think that will influence the way I write, but I think it will influence the way that I check what I write ... the messages that I'm giving.

For the Author one of the highlights of the project was 'hearing first hand' from parents about what the project had meant to them personally. She said:

You know, that it has really touched them and made a difference to them personally.

Scottish Book Trust representatives reported that they were pleased to have had the opportunity to collaborate with the Author, not only on the project but also in terms of being involved with the Author near the start of her career, and working with 'a writer on such a long timescale so intensively'. They believed that many of the strands of the project offered 'a true reflection of what is expected of any author' working now. They mentioned writers having contact with their audience and inspiring children through live literature and art workshops. They spoke about the 'pressure on authors and illustrators to be able to have that sort of public face'.

2.16. Involvement in the Interview Process

The findings demonstrate that the group's participation in the interviews to select the author was clearly an important aspect of the project design. During the discussion of their involvement in this process they talked about the sense of responsibility they had felt in terms of 'making a decision'. This feeling is illustrated in the following quotes from the interviews:

There were three different people that came in. But it was, it was quite scary thinking, 'Oh, we've got to choose. This is the person that we've got to pick'.

But it was kind of weird you know, and we're like, we're getting the last say in this. It's up to us.

As the project progressed the group were unanimous in their belief that they had chosen, as one parent said, 'the right person for the job'. Summing up the view of the group another parent said, 'Oh, we definitely made the right choice'.

The Home-Start Family Group Worker believed that the parents' involvement in the interview process had resulted in them having ownership of the project from the start. She said, 'I think they owned it immediately'. She believed that the parents had valued the formal nature of the interview process and that they had responded to it and that they 'knew the seriousness of it'.

In her opinion this aspect of the project design had resulted in the parents seeing that their views on who would be the best person for the job 'really mattered' and that all the candidates were published authors. Talking about the interview procedure and its impact on the parents she described it as having been an opportunity:

... to see that the authors were published, and that not only that but to the authors it was important that they liked them and their opinion really mattered.

2.17. The Showcase Event

The Showcase event at the end of the project was organised by Scottish Book Trust. The event was viewed by all participants as highly successful and as an opportunity to celebrate the work of the project. The Scottish Book Trust representatives interviewed believed that this was a key event and that it had been 'important to have a close to such a long project'.

The showcase event included an exhibition of artwork, photographs from the project and the illustrations from the children's book written by the parents and the Author in Residence.

Representatives from the parents group, Home-Start, Scottish Book Trust and the Author gave presentations describing their experiences of working on the project. Evidence gathered from the parent group and the Family Group Worker showed that parents had placed a high value on this opportunity to celebrate their achievements with members of their wider family and friends. Representatives from Home-Start,

Scottish Book Trust and the local libraries, as well as other agencies all attended the showcase event and, according to some of the professionals interviewed, this had highlighted the interagency nature of the project.

The Family Group Worker believed that the preparation for the showcase event had been an important focus for the group during the second phase of the project and that this had created 'an end goal'. She believed that this had been a very positive way 'to bring things to a close,' to celebrate success, mark the end of the group's contribution and to look forward to the publication of the book. She felt that the opportunity to share the work had been 'quite exciting' for the parents. She also spoke about how 'the idea of other people coming in to see the work' had been very motivating for the group because 'in any profession that does gee you on a bit'. The presence of Scottish Book Trust representatives was said by the parents to have made the book and the process of making it 'seem so real'.

According to the Family Group Worker the showcase event was 'an overall success and exceeded all expectations'. The parents were all very positive in their evaluation of the event. As one parent emphasised 'it was built around the families'. Parents said that they were 'made to feel very special', as one remarked 'just like a celebrity'. The group reported that they had enjoyed meeting all the people who attended the event and many of the parents noted 'how interested everyone was' in what the group had achieved. The following quotations from three different parents are representative of the group's view of the showcase event.

It was amazing to see so many people there and great to meet everyone from Home-Start and [Scottish Book Trust].

I enjoyed chatting with all of the different people, if they didn't know me they asked what I had done and what I thought. I liked that.

Everyone was really interested in who we were and what we'd done.

The Family Group Worker noted that giving the presentation on behalf of the group had been 'a confidence building experience' for the parent involved.

At the end of the Author's involvement with the group the Family Group Worker felt it was important to mark the end of the project by offering the Author a gift. She

explained that the parents spontaneously suggested creating a book of photographs, artwork, poetry and quotes for the Author to keep as a memento of her time with the group. She described how creating the book had taken three weeks and she believed that it was noteworthy that when planning the design of the book the parents instigated discussions about different aspects of the book based on what they had learnt during the course of the project. For example, they discussed the use of colour, illustration, rhyme and using an animal theme. She believed that it was significant that the group had decided to make a book and that they had the confidence to continue the book-making process without the support of the Writer in Residence. The group presented their gift to the Author at the showcase event.

As a surprise for the group the Author had framed illustrations from the book to gift to the parents at the showcase event. These were exhibited at the event and the parents took them home at the end of the afternoon. All the parents said how much they had appreciated this gift. As one parent commented enthusiastically:

We didn't know [the Author] would give us the artwork. As soon as she said it I was so excited, I just wanted to get to it and look to see where my sticker was! I love it!

3. Visits to Nurseries² by The Writer in Residence

This section outlines the findings from the nursery strand of the residency

3.1. Perspectives of Nursery Staff

It is noteworthy that all the nurseries reported that this was the first time that an Author had visited their nursery. All the five nurseries visited by the researchers agreed that the timing of the Author's visit 'fitted well' in the context of Early Years policy in Scotland, national curriculum developments and current initiatives aimed at supporting early literacy acquisition. This view was reflected in the comment made by one Head of Nursery who said:

It couldn't have come at a better time for us, basically.

In another nursery a member of staff, as well as noting how the Author's visit had complemented current curriculum priorities, also highlighted the nursery's intention to build on the activities covered during the visit.

That's part of our focus for the Curriculum for Excellence as well, literacy. And we're hoping to maybe develop that so that [the Author] can see where she left off with us and how we've taken it forward.

Almost all the nurseries viewed the visit as a 'great opportunity' for the children. The following comment illustrates this belief and demonstrates how staff believed the visit had the potential to support and enhance the on-going literacy experiences of the children:

Obviously we encourage children to read and to look at books and appreciate books, so when we heard about the Author coming, that was fantastic, it is not every day that the children meet an author. When we go through the books we know who writes the book, we know who the illustrator is, so we have got somebody sitting in front of us who, actually, that is their job and we reap that benefit. We were lucky that we could say 'We have got a lady who ... this is her book, this lady has written this book'.

²The establishments visited by the Writer in Residence covered a range of Early education provision including private nurseries, nursery classes and Pre-5 centres. The preferred term for this type of provision is 'Early education centres' (HMIe, 2007) but for brevity and consistency with the Scottish Book Trust project proposal the terms 'nursery' and 'nursery staff' will be used.

Many of the nursery staff interviewed made some comment about how the Author's visit had, as one put it, 'linked nicely' with their involvement with the Bookbug Gifting Programme and the previous Bookstart initiative. Discussing the Bookbug programme, some talked about the contents of the packs, distributing the book packs and the children's favourite books from the collections.

One Head of Nursery believed that a discussion with the children about the Author's planned visit had prompted a child to make a book at home, which he then brought in to show the staff and to gift to the Author. Describing the incident in detail, the Head of Nursery viewed this as a significant episode, and 'a step forward' for this particular child in terms of his literacy development. She identified the motivation, confidence and sense of achievement that underpinned the event. The following is an excerpt from her account:

We were speaking about the Author coming to the nursery and talking about how she wrote books and how she made pictures for these books. And he says, 'I can do that as well'. And I said, 'Oh, that's fantastic'. And he made this book and presented it to her when she came that day ... and [the Author] praised him so much. She said, 'Oh, I can see you are going to be a very good writer when you are older because this is such very, very good work for such a young boy'. So, he was very proud of his achievement. And he couldn't wait to show her something that he'd compiled.

Using the Author's visit as a stimulus for further literacy work with the children was highlighted by staff in all but one of the nurseries. Some of the activities described by staff included encouraging the children to retell the story that the Author had read to them, re-reading the book, drawing, making books and having focused conversations with children around these activities. It was clear from the comments by staff that the follow-up work had been embedded in the on-going literacy activities of the nursery. This finding is well represented by the following explanation offered by a member of staff:

We asked the children what they could recall ... some recalled it was the illustrator, some recalled it was the author. What was the story about? 'Oh it was about a dog', 'It was about a girl who was happy and she baked a pie'. The older ones, obviously, were the ones who recalled there were letters in it as well. They had good recall. That is a normal thing we do at the end of an activity.

3.2. Children's Recall of the Author's Visit and Other Follow-up Activities

In some of the nurseries staff scribed the children's recall of the Author's visit and the story she had read to them. The following examples are responses from children in three of the nursery groups where the Author had read her book *Apple Pie ABC*:

The girl is making an apple pie and there was lots of letters.
(Lewis, aged 4)

The dog wanted to eat the pie.
(Lucy, aged 3)

The lady read the story. Her name was Alison. The girl made an apple pie. There was a dog that ate all the apple pie up.
(Katie, aged 3)

There was a girl and the dog tried to eat the pie.
(Cameron, aged 4)

We had a visit from the illustrator, the little girl made a pie.
(Anna, aged 4)

Alison Murray told us a story. The lady told the story and the girl was making a pie.
(Connor, aged 4)

The dog wanted to eat the pie and there were letters in the story.
(Josh, aged 4)

As well as reading her book the Author introduced a sponge painting activity with the children where they were asked to create a character. The following is an example of a four-year old child's painting and her scribed recall of the activity (Figure 15). For more examples and a description of the activity see the Author's blog.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 15: *The lady read us a story and I talked about my butterflies. I'm painting my butterfly with the sponges. I used all colours but we didn't have pink. I like pink.*

As a further follow up in two nurseries the staff asked the children to close their eyes, imagine they were at home and think about who reads to them. The children were then asked to draw a picture of this and the members of staff scribed the children's comments (see Figures 16-20).



Figure 16: *'That's my daddy and my wee teddies'*



Figure 17: *'Grandma reading me a story'*



Figure 18: *'That's my daddy and the book he's reading to me'*

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 19: *'Mummy is lying in bed with me reading me a story'*³

³The member of staff also noted that this child had a good knowledge of letters and was beginning to write her name (see the top right hand corner of picture).



Figure 20: *'I've got ten books on my shelf. My mum is reading me a story in bed'*



Figure 21: *'This is my ladder to climb up. This is my butterfly book and people in it. This is me and my brother. I'm up the top my brother is at the bottom and this is my mum reading me a story'*

It is important to note that in one nursery staff reported that 'three or four out of twenty five children said, 'I don't get stories '.

3.3. Conversations between Parents and Nursery Staff

A noteworthy finding was that in some nurseries the Writer in Residence project seemed to have created opportunities for conversations between nursery staff and parents about literacy practices. However, because of issues of confidentiality around the membership of the Home-Start group not all of the nurseries were aware that

parents from their establishment were involved in the Writer in Residence project. In the nurseries where staff knew that the parents were involved with the project, it was clear that the parents had discussed the activities of the group with staff. Nursery staff reported that parents had told them ‘that they were going to be writing a book’ and that they had been very positive about the project saying, for example, that it was ‘great’ and ‘quite a social thing’. One parent had told a member of staff that taking part in the project had really helped her in terms of reading stories with her younger son.

In one nursery the staff had made a point of talking with parents to let them know that the Author had visited. In another they used an interesting technique aimed at promoting conversations about the event between children and parents at home. To encourage this talk they gave the children a badge to wear that said, ‘Ask me about the Author!’

In one nursery the staff reported that children had spontaneously shared their experience of the Author’s visit with parents when they arrived to collect them. The Head of Nursery explained that as part of the visit the Author had set up an activity where the children had created characters using paint and printing sponges. She said:

The whole room was excited. And every parent who came in saw what they were doing ... the children were actively taking their parents over to see their character. It was the children who took the initiative to say, ‘Come and see my character, I made this’. So they pushed the fact and the parents then became involved, because [the parents] were going, ‘Oh, and how did you do that?’ and the children said, ‘This lady came, it was a special lady’ ... the children were so excited, I think because they had created something from their imagination ... it was a character and it could be anything you wanted it to be. And each one’s different.

3.4. Creating New Partnerships and Encouraging Collaboration

A strong message came from two of the Heads of Nursery about the need for creating new partnerships and encouraging collaboration in the Early Years: a theme that is central to current policy in Scotland. Discussing the benefits of the Author’s visit for the children they both highlighted the benefits of working with someone outwith the nursery setting who could offer ‘different expertise.’ This view was well represented by one of the Heads of Nursery who said:

I think for years, teachers and Early Years practitioners have been seen to be everything to children. And the reality of it is we can't be everything. If we can bring any expert into our line of work that'll give the children a different avenue or a different view, or even a different face to deliver a service, I think that's wonderful.

The other believed that this was a time, as she said, to 'think out of the box' and she argued that:

In a climate where resources are limited, I think you've got to be a lot more creative in how you access things for children.

She went on to say that working with 'specialists' like authors 'would be a great value to children in their learning.'

The importance of developing positive partnerships with parents was stressed by all the nurseries. One member of staff offered an interesting idea that she felt could promote this partnership. She talked at length about the potential of encouraging the nursery parent who had been involved with the project to support other parents in the nursery in book sharing with their children. The following is an excerpt from what she said:

You do get parents coming up to you saying, 'They say read a book, read a book, but how do you read a book?' Some parents don't know how to read a book. What book do they choose? Too old for their child or too young for their child? It is not necessarily about telling the story. It is about interacting with the book, with the pictures. A lot of parents don't know that. Now we know that [the parent from the Group] knows all this ... it could be informative for us to, maybe, I don't know, any parents that are feeling insecure about reading, maybe getting [the parent from Group] to come in and speak to them. Not everybody knows how to read a story. It does pop up every now and again. We get a couple of parents saying, 'I don't feel good about this'. They might feel a bit intimidated speaking to us, but for another parent to be there to say, 'This really works, it's really good. I've seen the difference' and get her perspective on it, that would be really beneficial.

3.5. Key Participants' Perspectives on Issues to Consider for Future Projects

Most of the nursery staff interviewed suggested that it would have been helpful to have more information about what some described as 'the big picture' of the Writer in Residence project and to see where the Author's visit to the nurseries 'slotted into the jigsaw'. Summing this view up one interviewee said:

I didn't get information that connected it all together. It would have been much better for us even to see a plan of how it all fitted together.

The nurseries had received information about the Author's visit, however, some staff felt that they would have liked more opportunity to plan and organise the session. That said, it is important to note that overall the Author's visit was evaluated very positively by participating nurseries.

It was clear from the interview data that Scottish Book Trust representatives were aware of the issues noted by the nursery staff and had already considered how they would modify the project design if they were to repeat the initiative in another community. For example, they said that pre-project they would invite the nursery staff to a presentation that would offer an overview of the whole project and that they would involve nursery staff in the 'planning and preparation' of the nursery strand. The Writer in Residence echoed the need to involve the nurseries in the planning and suggested that dedicated time was required for this planning and co-ordination of the nursery involvement. She also stressed the importance of the nurseries feeling 'much more part' of the overall process as well as the benefits of making links between the different strands of the project.

Other developments, suggested by Scottish Book Trust representatives were creating a website feature of the children's artwork and asking the nurseries for feedback, and sharing the published book with the nurseries that had been involved in the project. The Author thought it would be worthwhile sending out 'a pack' before the event to 'get them excited about the visit.'

The aim of the nursery strand of the residency was to involve the nurseries attended by the children of the parents who were taking part with the project. However, Scottish Book Trust representatives explained that this 'group focus' for the nursery strand had proved challenging to organise in terms of matching children to the specific nurseries and matching new families who joined the group during the project. They discussed whether the administration of the nursery strand of the project would have been easier if just a selection of nurseries in the local area had been targeted and whether this approach could have impacted positively on the local community. They explained that although at the outset there was a clear overall design for the project there had been

challenges associated with planning aspects at the initiation. They described this phase of the project as being a 'very organic process' because certain decisions, including how the nursery involvement would be organised, depended on who was chosen to be the Writer in Residence.

It is noteworthy that all the nurseries reported that this was the first time that an author had visited their nursery and they all indicated that they would be interested in working again with visiting authors. Scottish Book Trust representatives believed that supporting these author visits was a very positive development for their organisation and they said that they were keen to increase author involvement in nurseries.

During the interviews nursery staff offered a number of suggestions for future projects. These included receiving copies of the author's books before the session so that they could set the context and familiarise the children with the author's work; having discussions with the author prior to the session so that account can be taken of individual Early Years contexts and settings; and providing a list of nurseries in the area that are involved in an initiative so that staff from different establishments could liaise and share experiences.

4. Discussion

The evaluation demonstrates that key strengths of the project were the interagency partnership between Scottish Book Trust and Home-Start and the collaboration between the parent group, the Family Group Worker and the Author. The findings highlight the importance of developing effective partnerships and this was central to the success of the Early Years Writer in Residence project. This reflects one of the key recommendations contained within the recent report, *Joining the Dots: A Better Start for Scotland's Children* (Deacon, 2011) which states that when parents and children need support this should be delivered in an integrated way. Furthermore, it highlights the need for more collaborative ventures.

The findings suggest that the Author developed a positive working relationship with the parents based on mutual respect and that she was prepared to learn from the parents. The role of the Author was fundamental in increasing the parents' capacity to learn about language in an informal environment. She encouraged participation and allowed the ideas for the book to emerge naturally from the workshops. The Author effectively designed a variety of challenging yet accessible creative writing activities for the parents. The findings indicate that the knowledge, skills and ideas generated from the workshops were then used by the parents to re-examine their literacy practices in the home. This approach to empowering parents echoes one of the key messages within the Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2011).

The findings demonstrate that the partnership with parents was established from the very beginning through their involvement in the selection process for the Author. The parents' commitment was evident from the start and many of the parents believed that the experience of taking part in the project would have a positive impact on them personally and on their children. Indeed, wanting 'the best' for their children was one of the motivating factors for taking part in the project. A consistent theme emerging from the interviews with the parents was a sense of pride and ownership associated with the shared authorship and they believed that their experience of being involved in an authentic writing and book publication process had strengthened the relationships within the group.

The findings suggest that the Family Group Worker played a key role in terms of her professional expertise, knowledge of the group dynamics and her commitment to the project. She recognised the potential benefits of the project and was aware of the challenges around balancing the needs of the Home-Start group and the requirements of the project.

The interagency partnership between Scottish Book Trust and Home-Start facilitated the design and implementation of the Early Years Writer in Residence project. The importance of having a book that could be shared with others, as part of the Scottish Book Trust national book gifting programme, seemed to contribute to the parents' confidence and sense of achievement. The showcase event provided an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and work of the project with the parents and their families and friends and other agencies. The view of Scottish Book Trust representatives was that this 'ambitious project' involving the author working closely with parents and nurseries had gone some way to facilitate capacity building within a community. The potential of this type of collaborative venture, which fits neatly with recommendations contained in the Scottish Government's recently commissioned report (Deacon, 2011) warrants further discussion and research.

The latest *Growing Up in Scotland* report (Bradshaw, 2011) highlights the importance of strategies that focus on the quality of the parent-child relationship and frequency of home learning activities. Almost all the parents believed that participating in the project had supported them in establishing more of a 'reading routine' with their children and they talked about the positive impact on the quality of these reading sessions. When interviewed parents mentioned changes to the way they approached storytelling, talking more with their children about the books they read together, and they described conversations with their children where there was a shared literacy focus for the talk. It could be argued that this type of interaction is an example of what Sylva and her colleagues (2005) refer to as 'sustained shared thinking'. This engagement can involve building upon children's interests, extending a narrative and developing children's thinking. Research has shown that the quality of these interactions around book sharing has an impact on a young child becoming a reader (Adams, 1990; Bus et al., 1995; Weinberger, 1996).

The evaluation highlighted a number of examples of parents observing, recognising and reporting examples of what they believed to be significant events in terms of their children's early literacy development. Future projects should consider including opportunities to use parents' observations as a focus for discussion and learning about children's emergent literacy development.

Although the residency may be considered 'heavy on resources' there is a growing consensus of opinion of the importance of intervening early and investing in the early stages of a child's life (Scottish Government, 2011). The Scottish Government's Literacy Action Plan points to the importance of anti-poverty strategies and states:

We must also focus action on ensuring people in deprived areas get the support they need to develop literacy skills, which will help them to improve their circumstances and that of their families and communities.
(Scottish Government, 2010:5)

The residency also included visits by the Author to nurseries and the evaluation showed that these visits were appreciated by staff because they believed that they complemented current national curriculum developments and initiatives aimed at supporting early literacy acquisition. During the interviews the Heads of Nursery highlighted the potential of author visits to nurseries and linked this to a theme that is central to current policy in Scotland, namely the need to create new partnerships and to encourage collaboration in the early years (Scottish Executive, 2007).

One of main aims of the evaluation was to identify significant features of the project and critically appraise the implementation of the initiative. This evaluation has shown the residency to be successful on a number of levels but, as with any new project, there are lessons to be learned. It would be unwise to simply transfer features of this Writer in Residence project to any future projects, since another residency may well have a different design and will have its own unique characteristics in terms of the choice of author, families involved, and community context. That said, insights were gained from this evaluation which identify the strengths of the residency and suggest issues for consideration that can be used to inform and underpin future projects. The key findings and recommendations are outlined in the next section.

5. Key Findings and Recommendations

5.1. Key Findings

- There was evidence to suggest that a key strength of the project was the interagency partnership and the collaboration between the parent group, the Family Group Worker and the Author.
- The findings point to the key role played by the Family Group Worker in terms of her professional expertise, knowledge of the needs of the group, and her commitment to the project.
- The findings highlighted the challenges around balancing the needs of the Home-Start group and the requirements of the project.
- The scope of the project created challenges for the Author in terms of time pressures, support and the multiple roles required for involvement in the different strands of the residency.
- Data gathered from parents before the project began indicated that all were involved to some extent in reading to their children, however, many mentioned difficulties with this activity including finding dedicated time and sustaining their children's interest.
- From the beginning of the project there was evidence to suggest that many of the parents believed that the experience of taking part in the project might have a positive impact on them personally and on their children.
- The approach adopted by the author, in terms of her inclusive methods and her belief that the inspiration for the book should emerge from the work with the parents, was central to the success of the project.
- There is evidence to suggest that new experiences such as regular participation in language games and deconstructing a book gave parents insights into sharing texts with their children, ideas for conversations about language and increased confidence to try out and develop new literacy practices in the home.

- Almost all the parents believed that participating in the project had supported them in establishing more of a 'reading routine' with their children and they talked about the positive impact on the quality of these reading sessions.
- Many parents believed that their involvement in the project had reminded them of the importance of reading to their children and they described how they were now prioritising this activity.
- There were many examples of parents reflecting on how the sessions with the Author had heightened their awareness of the importance of how books can support children's learning and children's enjoyment of being read to.
- Many parents believed that taking part in the activities that the Author had organised to support their writing of the picture book had encouraged them to see things through the 'eyes of a child'.
- There was evidence to suggest that parents and professionals reported enhanced communication amongst the parents about literacy practices and activities.
- Exploring the contents of the Bookbug packs and using an 'informal' lending library increased communication about books during the sessions.
- There was evidence from the data collected that some of the parents had talked to their children about their involvement in writing the book and the activities of the group.
- Some parents reported that their involvement in the project had supported them with making up stories at home with their children.
- There was evidence that parents' involvement in activities, designed by the author to support the book writing process, increased their capacity to learn about language in an informal environment and gave parents a deeper understanding about how language is used to create texts.
- Almost all the parents claimed to be reading with more confidence and expression and there was evidence that they could recognise techniques used by the Author and they reported that they made use of this knowledge to support reading with their children.

- All the parents believed that there had been a notable change in the way that they viewed picture books and that the project had ‘opened their eyes’ to the complex process involved in creating a book for young children.
- All of the parents believed that taking part in the project had resulted in them becoming aware of how a picture book is ‘put together’ and they claimed to be talking to their children about this and using this new knowledge to explain the different aspects.
- Some parents offered detailed examples of their children’s early literacy behaviour and from their reports it seemed that they valued and recognised the significance of these events in terms of their children’s emergent literacy development.
- Statements made by the parents demonstrated a sense of pride, ownership and an emotional involvement associated with the shared authorship and publication of the book.
- The participants believed that their experience of being involved in an authentic writing and book publication process had contributed to the success of the project.
- The Author reported that the residency had been an enriching experience and an opportunity to work closely with her audience.
- All the nurseries reported that it was their first experience of an author’s visit and all expressed interest in working again with visiting authors.
- Nursery staff believed that the Author’s visit to their establishments ‘fitted well’ in the context of Early Years policy in Scotland, national curriculum developments and current initiatives aimed at supporting early literacy.
- Participants reported that the Author’s visit had stimulated conversations between nursery staff, parents and their children about the literacy activities in the nursery and the home.
- The showcase event was evaluated positively by all participants and viewed as an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and work of the project with family, friends and other agencies.

- Evidence suggests that the showcase event had a positive impact on many of the parents' self-esteem and confidence.

5.2. Recommendations

Future Writer in Residency projects should consider the following:

- The potential that this type of capacity building community project has to support current Scottish Government Early Years policy and priorities.
- The potential of this kind of collaborative venture to strengthen the capacity of families to develop their understanding of language and literacy and encourage their involvement in literacy practices, in particular book sharing.
- Further development of Early Years literacy initiatives that draw on a range of models of inter-agency partnership.
- The scope of the residency and the different roles and responsibilities required within the different strands of the project.
- The challenges around balancing the needs of the participating group and the requirements of the residency.
- The need to involve parents at all stages of the project including the selection of the Writer in Residence.
- The significance of having a published end product that can be shared with others.
- The importance of the author having knowledge and experience of designing creative writing activities suitable for adult learners.
- The importance of encouraging parents to see things from a child's perspective and the possible impact this can have on effective parenting.
- The potential of using the parents' observations of their children's early literacy behaviour as a focus for group discussions and learning about emergent literacy development.
- The need for participating nurseries to have access to information about the 'big picture' of the initiative as well as opportunities to be involved in the

planning and co-ordination of their involvement. The planning should include discussions with the author so that account can be taken of individual Early Years contexts and settings.

- The potential of increasing author involvement in nurseries to support the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.
- The possibility of encouraging participating parents to support other parents in the nursery in book sharing with their children.
- The potential of family participation in literacy related activities that link with the project, for example theatre visits.
- The range of communication opportunities available to participants including the use of new technologies.
- The potential of the use of the Bookbug packs as a common resource for focused literacy development activities.
- The involvement of school-aged children as key participants to encourage book sharing among siblings.

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